

S. MARSHAK



TWELVE MONTHS

A FAIRY-TALE

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
MOSCOW

С. МАРШАК

ДВЕНАДЦАТЬ МЕСЯЦЕВ

Edited by O. Gorchakov

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CHARACTERS

Old Woman
Daughter
Stepdaughter
Queen
Lady In Waiting
Professor Of The Three R's
Chancellor
Commander Of The Royal Bodyguard
Officer Of The Royal Bodyguard
Royal Prosecutor
Ambassador Of The Western Kingdom
Ambassador Of The Eastern Kingdom
Head Gardener
Old Soldier
Young Soldier
Wolf
Old Raven
Hare
First Squirrel
Second Squirrel
Bear
Fox
The Twelve Months
First Herald
Second Herald
Forest Folk, Guests, Musicians
Courtiers, Pages, Gardeners,
Servants, Ladies Of The Court
Coachman, Guards



ACT I

SCENE 1

A snug-looking glade in a wintry forest. Virgin snow lies in wa drifts and covers the trees with downy caps. It is still. For a few m ments the scene appears empty, almost dead. Then a sunbeam r over the snow and illumines, in turn, the whitish-grey head o WOLF *peeping out from the thicket, an* OLD RAVEN *perched pine-tree, and a* SQUIRREL *nestling between the forking bra over a hollow in a trunk. There are sounds of rustling, of fla wings, of crunching dry twigs. The forest is coming to lif*

WOLF: Ow-oo-oo! To look around you'd think nobody in the forest, that the place is empty, dese you can't fool me. I know the Hare is somewhere a

Squirrel's in the hollow, the Raven's up on a branch, the Partridges are under the snow-drifts. Ow-oo-oo! How I'd love to gobble them all up!

OLD RAVEN: Cr-roak! Cr-roak! Liar-r! You can't eat up ever-rybody.

WOLF: Stop your croaking! I'm so hungry my belly has dried up and my teeth are chattering.

OLD RAVEN: Cr-roak! Cr-roak! Go your-r way, brother-r! Don't you dar-re touch anybody, or else! . . . I'm a sharp-eyed r-raven, and from this tree I can see all of thirty miles away.

WOLF: Well, what do you see?

OLD RAVEN: Croak! Croak! A Soldier is coming up the road. He's carrying the Wolf's death slung across his back, and at his side the Wolf's peril is swinging. Croak! Croak! Where are you off to, Grey Wolf?

WOLF: You bore me with your talk, old fellow. I'm going to look for a quiet place with no croaking ravens in it! *(Runs off.)*

OLD RAVEN: Croak! Croak! So that frightened you, Grey Wolf, made you slink away with your tail between your legs? Yes, the deeper into the forest you go, the farther from death you'll be. The soldier is not coming after you at all. He's coming to get a fir-tree and is pulling a sledge behind him. It's New Year's Eve tonight, and we're having a regular New Year's frost. It would be a good thing to spread out my wings, do a little flying, and warm myself. But I've grown too old—too old. Croak! Croak!

The OLD RAVEN hides himself among the branches. A HARE leaps out into the glade. Up on the tree another SQUIRREL appears beside the one already there.

HARE *(clapping his paws):* Brrr! It's cold—so cold it takes your breath away, and your feet freeze to the snow as you run. Come on, you Squirrels, let's play burn.

FIRST SQUIRREL: All right, Hare. Who's going to burn first?

HARE: We'll count out.

FIRST SQUIRREL: All right. Here goes!

Sly old Squint-Eye has a ruse:
He always wears two pairs of shoes
And leaves no telltale tracks, you see,
For his hungry enemy!

Well he knows he must beware
Of the Wolf and of the Bear.
Out you come now—it's your turn
To do the catching, for you burn!

HARE (stepping forward as the two SQUIRRELS stand behind him):

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!
Birds are singing,
Bells are ringing.
Look up in the sky!

FIRST SQUIRREL: Catch me, Hare!

SECOND SQUIRREL: You'll never get me! *(The two SQUIRRELS, running past the HARE on either side, race away over the snow; the HARE runs after them. At that moment a young girl, the STEPDAUGHTER, enters the clearing, pulling a sledge. She wears a large tattered kerchief, an old jacket, shabby boots, and coarse mittens, and carries a small hatchet stuck in her belt. Stopping between two trees, she watches the HARE and the*

SQUIRRELS, who are so preoccupied with their game that they do not see her. The SQUIRRELS run full tilt up a tree.)

HARE: Where are you going? You can't do that—it's not fair. I won't play with you.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Come on, Hare, jump!

SECOND SQUIRREL: That's it, leap up!

FIRST SQUIRREL: Swing your tail and up you go.

HARE *(after a few attempts to jump, pitifully):* My tail is too short! *(The SQUIRRELS laugh. So does the STEPDAUGHTER. Noticing her, the SQUIRRELS and the HARE vanish instantly.)*

STEPDAUGHTER *(drying her eyes with a mitten):* Oh, dear Heaven! I never heard anything so funny! It's made me hot in spite of the frost. "My tail's too short", he says. His very words! I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't heard it with my own ears. *(Laughs.)*

An OLD SOLDIER comes into the glade. He has a big axe stuck in his belt and is drawing a sledge. He has a long moustache, and altogether looks like OLD SOLDIER he is.

OLD SOLDIER: Hullo, my pretty lass! What's making you so happy? Have you found a treasure trove or heard some good news? *(The STEPDAUGHTER, shaking with laughter, waves her hand at him helplessly.)* Come on, tell us what's so funny! Perhaps I can share the laugh with you.

STEPDAUGHTER: You won't believe me.

OLD SOLDIER: I don't know about that. We soldiers have heard and seen lots of things in our day. We believe what's right but we don't let anybody fool us.

STEPDAUGHTER: Here, on this very spot, a hare and two squirrels were playing burn a minute ago.

OLD SOLDIER: Is that so?

STEPDAUGHTER: Cross my heart! Just like kids playing in the streets: "Fire, burn high—Flame, never die!" The hare was tearing after the squirrels, when oops!—up a tree they went! And not only that—they kept teasing him from the tree: "Come on, jump up here, leap up!"

OLD SOLDIER: And they spoke like that in our own language?

STEPDAUGHTER: They did.

OLD SOLDIER: Well, just think of that!

STEPDAUGHTER: You see, you don't believe me.

OLD SOLDIER: Not believe you on a day like today? Oh, no. Today, you know, is the end of the old year and the beginning of the new. And I heard my grandfather say that his grandfather used to tell him that on New Year's Eve anything can happen in the world—all you have to do is to look sharp not to miss it. That's no great wonder, to see squirrels and hares play burn. Even more marvellous things happen on New Year's Eve.

STEPDAUGHTER: What things?

OLD SOLDIER: Well, my grandfather told me—believe it or not—that once on New Year's Eve his grandfather met all the twelve months together.

STEPDAUGHTER: Did he really?

OLD SOLDIER: Cross my heart! The old man saw the whole year, winter and summer, spring and autumn, all at the same time. It was a sight he could never forget. He told his son about it and bade him tell his grandchildren about it. That's how I come to know the story.

STEPDAUGHTER: But I don't see how winter, summer, spring, and autumn can all come together. They're so different!

OLD SOLDIER: Well, I only say what I know. But what has brought you here on such a cold day? I take orders from my chiefs—and I've been sent here. Who sent you?

STEPDAUGHTER: I haven't come here of my own free will either.

OLD SOLDIER: Are you in service?

STEPDAUGHTER: No, I live at home.

OLD SOLDIER: Then how did your mother happen to let you out?

STEPDAUGHTER: My mother wouldn't have let me out but my stepmother did—she told me to get some brushwood.

OLD SOLDIER: I see. So you're an orphan? That's why your uniform is in such a state. I'm sure the wind blows right through you. Well, I'll give you a hand and afterwards I'll see to my own business.

The STEPDAUGHTER and the OLD SOLDIER gather brushwood and pile it on the girl's sledge.

STEPDAUGHTER: And what's your business?

OLD SOLDIER: I have to cut a fir-tree—the best fir-tree in the forest—so branchy, so straight, and so green that there's none like it.

STEPDAUGHTER: Who will you be cutting it for?

OLD SOLDIER: Who? The Queen, of course. Tomorrow the palace will be full of guests—so we must have a surprise for them.

STEPDAUGHTER: I'm sure you need the tallest fir-tree in the forest . . .

OLD SOLDIER: Oh no! Our mistress hates to see anything taller than her throne in the palace. Her Majesty wants a pretty little fir-tree.

STEPDAUGHTER: What are you going to hang on your tree?

OLD SOLDIER: The same as everybody. All sorts of toys, and crackers, and trinkets. Only, other people make them out of gilt paper and coloured glass—and we have them all of pure gold and diamonds. Other people have dolls and rabbits made of plain cloth—ours are made of the best satin.

STEPDAUGHTER: Do you mean to say the Queen still plays with dolls?

OLD SOLDIER: Why shouldn't she? She may be a queen but she's no older than you are.

STEPDAUGHTER: I gave up dolls years ago.

OLD SOLDIER: Well, you must be too busy for that, and she has lots of time. She has nobody to give orders to her, you see. Since the old King and Queen died, she's been giving orders to everybody.

STEPDAUGHTER: Then the Queen, too, is an orphan?

OLD SOLDIER: It looks that way.

STEPDAUGHTER: I'm sorry for her.

OLD SOLDIER: Who wouldn't be? There's nobody around to put good sense into her head. Well, your job is done. You have enough brushwood to last you a week. And it's time I turned to my own job—started looking for a tree—or I'll get it in the neck from my little orphan—she stands for no nonsense.

STEPDAUGHTER: Just like my stepmother, and my stepsister, too. You can never please them, no matter what you do. Whichever way you turn, it's always the wrong way with them.

OLD SOLDIER: Don't worry, you won't have to put up with it for ever. You're still young and you'll see better days.

Take our army service: it's long enough, isn't it? Yet it, too, comes to an end.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you for your kind words—and for the brushwood. I've finished my work early today—the sun's still high up. Now let me show you a fir-tree I saw here—it may be just what you want. It's a beautiful tree; every branch on it is a beauty.

OLD SOLDIER: I'll be glad to have you show me. You seem to be at home in the forest. No wonder the Squirrels and Hares are not afraid to play burn as you look on. *(Leaving their sledges, the STEPDAUGHTER and the OLD SOLDIER disappear among the trees. For a moment the stage is empty. Then the branches of two old snow-covered fir-trees move apart, admitting two tall old men, the months DECEMBER and JANUARY. JANUARY wears a white fur coat and cap. DECEMBER wears a striped black-and-white fur coat and a white fur cap trimmed with black.)*

DECEMBER: There you are, Brother, take over the management. I'm sure everything is in order. There's enough snow—the birches are up to their waists in it, the pines up to their knees. Now it'll do no harm if the frost lets itself go. I've lived behind the clouds most of my time but you can have the sun to play with during your turn.

JANUARY: Thank you, Brother, I can see you've done a good job. And how is your ice on the streams and lakes—is it strong?

DECEMER: It holds up all right. But it wouldn't be a bad idea to freeze it a little more.

JANUARY: I'll see to it. You can depend on me. Well, and how are the forest folk?

DECEMBER: Oh, they're behaving very nicely. Those who

have to sleep, sleep, and those who don't have to—they either skip or prowl about. I'd better call them so you can look them over.

Claps his mittened hands. A WOLF and a FOX peek out among the trees. The SQUIRRELS appear on the branches. The HARE leaps into the centre of the glade. Ears of other HARES can be seen stirring behind snow-drifts. The WOLF and the FOX eye the little animals, ready to jump on them, but JANUARY wags an admonishing finger.

JANUARY: What are you up to, Red? And you, Grey? Do you think we've called the Hares to fill your tummies? Oh, no. You'll have to see about your dinner without our help. What we want is to count all you forest folk, the Hares, and the Squirrels, and you, too, the fellows with sharp teeth.

The WOLF and the FOX subside. The two old men unhurriedly count the animals.

DECEMBER:

Come, show up for roll-call,
Hurry to this oak,
Badger, Wolf, and Fox, and all,
Furred and feathered folk!
Martens, Hares, and Ravens, too,
Creatures young and old...
Now I've counted all of you—
A million folk, all told!

JANUARY: All right. You're all counted. You can go to your homes and your jobs now. *(The animals disappear.)* And now, Brother, it's time we made ready for the holiday—freshened up the snow in the forest, silvered up the trees. You're still the master here.

Take our army service: it's long enough, isn't it? Yet it, too, comes to an end.

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DECEMBER: Oh, they're behaving very nicely. Those who

get going. Though why should you wait for me? In your clothes you'll be frozen stiff in no time. My, my, how it blows!

STEPDAUGHTER: I'll be all right. I'm used to this. *(She helps the SOLDIER tie the tree.)*

OLD SOLDIER: Well, that's that. Now, I'll walk in front and you follow my trail—it'll be easier for you that way. Let's go.

STEPDAUGHTER: Let's go! *(Starts.)* Oh!

OLD SOLDIER: What's the matter?

STEPDAUGHTER: Look. Two old men in white fur coats are standing there, behind those pine-trees.

OLD SOLDIER: What old men? Where? *(Takes a step forward. The trees draw together and screen the old men.)* There's nobody there. You're seeing things. Those are just pine-trees.

STEPDAUGHTER: I swear I saw them—two old men in fur coats and caps.

OLD SOLDIER: Today even trees wear coats and caps. Let's get going. And just keep looking straight ahead. In a New Year's storm, deep in a forest, worse things may leap before your eyes.

The STEPDAUGHTER and the SOLDIER go off. DECEMBER and JANUARY reappear from behind the trees.

JANUARY: Are they gone?

DECEMBER: They are. *(Peers after them, shading his eyes with his hand.)* They're quite a distance away, too. I can just see them going down the hill.

JANUARY: Well, your last visitors, it seems. There'll be no more human beings in the forest this year. Let's call our brothers and start a New Year's bonfire. We'll set honey to brew to last us the whole year through.

DECEMBER: And who's to find wood for the fire?

JANUARY: The Winter Months.

DECEMBER: And who'll get the fire?
VOICES FROM THE FOREST: The Spring Months.
DECEMBER: Who's to fan the fire?
VOICES: The Summer Months.
DECEMBER: Who's to put out the fire?
VOICES: The Autumn Months.

Shadows flit among the trees in the distance. Lights flicker through the branches.

JANUARY: Well, Brother, it looks as if everybody's here who should be. Lock the forest for the night. No more going in or out.

DECEMBER: All right. I will.
Winter storm, cold and white,
Whip the snow into flight.
Make it whirl,
Make it twirl,
Make it dance, make it swirl.
Spread your mantle on the ground,
Wall the woods with snow around.
With icy key and snowy lock
Every road and pathway block!

(A curtain of falling snow hides the forest.)

SCENE 2

The QUEEN's classroom in the royal palace. The blackboard is set in an elaborate gold frame. At the desk, which is made of rose wood, the fourteen-year-old QUEEN is sitting on a velvet cushion writing

with a long gold quill. Standing before her is the PROFESSOR OF THE THREE R's. *He has a grey beard and in his mantle and odd doctor's cap with a tassel resembles an old-time astrologer.*

QUEEN: I detest writing. It stains all your fingers with ink.

PROFESSOR: You are perfectly right, Your Majesty. It's a highly unpleasant occupation. The ancient poets knew what they were doing when they dispensed with all writing implements. That's why science classes their work as oral literature. However, I make bold to request Your Majesty to inscribe four more lines with your royal hand.

QUEEN: All right. Dictate them.

PROFESSOR:

The meadow grass is turning green,
The sun shines bright and clear,
The swallow flying in the sky
Announces spring is here.

QUEEN: I'll write only the first line. *(Writes.)* The meadow green is turning grass...

(Enter the CHANCELLOR.*)*

CHANCELLOR: Good morning, Your Majesty. May I kindly request you to attach your signature to one proclamation and three decrees?

QUEEN: More writing? Oh, well. But in that case I won't write "turning grass." Give me your horrid papers. *(Signs the papers.)*

CHANCELLOR: Thank you, Your Majesty. Now I beg leave to ask Your Majesty to inscribe...

QUEEN: Inscribe again?

CHANCELLOR: Only signify your royal will on this petition.

QUEEN *(impatiently)*: What is it I have to inscribe?

CHANCELLOR: One of two things, Your Majesty—either "hang" or "pardon."

(QUEEN to herself): Par-don. Hang. I'll write "hang." It's shorter.

The CHANCELLOR takes the papers, makes a bow, and goes off.

PROFESSOR *(sighing deeply)*: A short word makes a long life come to an abrupt end...

QUEEN: Whatever do you mean?

PROFESSOR: Ah, Your Majesty, do you realize what you wrote just now?

QUEEN: Why, have I made another mistake? Does the word spell "h-a-n-k"?

PROFESSOR: No, the spelling was correct. Nevertheless you made a gross mistake.

QUEEN: What was it?

PROFESSOR: You killed a man without stopping to think!

QUEEN: I like that! Do you expect me to write and think at the same time?

PROFESSOR: No, I don't. You have to think first.

QUEEN: If you had your way, I would do nothing but think, think, think all the time and end up in the royal lunatic asylum. Luckily, I always have my own way. Well, where are we? Hurry up, or I'll die in this classroom!

PROFESSOR: Permit me to ask Your Majesty what seven times eight makes.

QUEEN: I cannot recall. This silly business never interested me very much. Did it interest you?

PROFESSOR: Of course it did, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: How extraordinary! Well, good-bye now. Our lesson is over. Tonight being New Year's Eve, I have an awful lot to see to.

PROFESSOR: As it may please Your Majesty. *(Obediently, with a sad air, picks up the books.)*

QUEEN *(leaning on the desk with her elbows and watching the PROFESSOR vacantly)*: Really, it's much better to be a queen than an ordinary schoolgirl. Everybody obeys me, even my teacher. Now tell me, Professor, what would you have done with any other pupil if she had refused to answer you what seven times eight makes?

PROFESSOR: I dare not say, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: It's all right, I permit you.

PROFESSOR *(timidly)*: I'd have put her in the corner.

QUEEN: Ha! Ha! Ha! *(Pointing at the corners.)* Which corner? This or that?

PROFESSOR: It doesn't make much difference, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: I would have preferred this one—it looks cosier. *(Walks into the corner.)* And what if she had persisted in refusing to tell you what seven times eight makes?

PROFESSOR: I would have—I beg your forgiveness, Your Majesty—I would have made her go without dinner.

QUEEN: Without dinner? But she may be expecting guests—say, ambassadors of some foreign kingdom or some foreign prince.

PROFESSOR: I'm not talking about a queen, Your Majesty, but an ordinary schoolgirl.

QUEEN *(drawing an arm-chair into the corner and sitting down)*: Poor ordinary schoolgirl! I see you're a very cruel man. Do you know I can have you hanged? This very day, if I want to.

PROFESSOR *(shaking):* Your Majesty!

QUEEN: Yes, I can, I can. And I really see no reason why I shouldn't.

PROFESSOR: But what have I done to displease Your Majesty?

QUEEN: Well, I don't know. You are very hard to please. When I write something, you say it's wrong. When I give you an answer, you say it's not the right one. I like people to agree with me.

PROFESSOR: I swear by my life, Your Majesty, I'll never disagree with you against your wishes.

QUEEN: You swear by you life? Splendid. In that case we may go on with our lesson. Ask me some question. *(She goes back to her desk and sits down.)*

PROFESSOR: What does six times six make, Your Majesty?

QUEEN *(looking at him coyly):* Eleven.

PROFESSOR *(with a melancholy air):* That's perfectly correct, Your Majesty. And how much is eight times eight?

QUEEN: Three.

PROFESSOR: Correct, Your Majesty. And how much is...

QUEEN: Always how much! You're such an inquisitive man—keep asking questions. Why don't you tell me something interesting yourself?

PROFESSOR: You want me to tell you something interesting, Your Majesty? Precisely what would you like me to tell you about?

QUEEN: Oh, I don't know. Something about the New Year, perhaps. Today is New Year's Eve, isn't it?

PROFESSOR: Yes, Your Majesty. A new year will begin tomorrow. A year consists of twelve months, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Does it really?

PROFESSOR: Exactly twelve months, Your Majesty. The

months are—January, February, March, April, May, June, July...

QUEEN: What a number of them! And you know each one by its name? You do have a wonderful memory!

PROFESSOR: Thank you, Your Majesty. August, September, October, November, and December.

QUEEN: Imagine that!

PROFESSOR: The months follow one another. Immediately one month ends, the other begins. There was never known a case when April came before March, or September before August.

QUEEN: And what if I should want April to come immediately?

PROFESSOR: That couldn't be done, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Arguing again?

PROFESSOR *(in an imploring tone):* It's not I who argue with Your Majesty. It is science and nature.

QUEEN: My goodness! But suppose I pass such a law and stamp it with the Great Seal?

PROFESSOR *(spreading out his arms helplessly):* I'm afraid that won't help either. But Your Majesty will hardly need such a change in the calendar. After all, each month brings us its gifts and pastimes. December, January, and February give us ice skating, the New Year's fir-tree, and Shrovetide. In March a thaw sets in, and in April the first snowdrops peep out from under the melting snow...

QUEEN: That's why I want it to be April now. I love snowdrops. I've never seen them.

PROFESSOR: April is only a short time off, Your Majesty, just three months or ninety days.

QUEEN: Ninety? I can't wait for three days! I'm having the New Year's reception tomorrow, and I want those—what do you call them?—snowdrops to decorate my table.

PROFESSOR: But the laws of nature, Your Majesty...

QUEEN *(cutting him short)*: I'm going to pass a new law of nature. *(Claps her hands.)* Hullo, there! Send me the Chancellor. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* Now you sit at my desk and write. It's my turn to dictate. *(Pauses.)* Well, "the meadow grass is turning green, the sun shines bright and clear." Yes, write as I say. *(Pauses again.)* "The meadow grass is turning green, the sun shines bright and clear. And spring flowers are blossoming in our royal forests. Wherefore we graciously command that a basketful of snowdrops be delivered at our palace for New Year's Eve. The loyal subject who carries out our sovereign wish will be rewarded by us right royally." What could I promise them? Wait, don't write that down. Oh, I know. Now write. "We will give that person as much gold as will fill his basket, present him with a velvet coat lined with silver fox, and will permit him to take part in our royal New Year's procession in our city." Have you written that? You are so slow!

PROFESSOR: "—lined with silver fox..." It's a long time, Your Majesty, since I've taken dictation.

QUEEN: Never mind. Now hand me the quill and I'll inscribe my royal name. *(Scribbles her name quickly and waves the sheet to dry the ink. As she is doing this the CHANCELLOR enters.)* Put the seal here and here. And take measures that everybody in the city may know my decree.

CHANCELLOR *(runs his eyes over the paper)*: Put the seal on this? As Your Majesty commands.

QUEEN: Yes, it is my command and you must carry it out.

The curtain falls. Two heralds march out with trumpets and scrolls. A flourish of trumpets is heard.

FIRST HERALD:

On New Year's Eve, on New Year's Eve
We issue this decree:
It is our wish that snowdrops bloom
In royal wood and lea!

SECOND HERALD:

The meadow grass is turning green,
The sun shines bright and clear,
The swallow flying in the sky
Announces spring is here.

FIRST HERALD:

Who dares to doubt the grass is green,
To doubt that spring is here,
That swallows fly now in the sky
So sunny, bright, and clear?

SECOND HERALD:

That snowdrops bloom on New Year's Eve
We solemnly lay down,
And any subject who says nay
Is outlawed by the Crown!

FIRST HERALD: Wherefore we graciously command that a basketful of snowdrops be delivered at our palace for New Year's Eve.

SECOND HERALD: The loyal subject who carries out our sovereign wish will be rewarded by us right royally.

FIRST HERALD: We will give that person as much gold as will fill his basket.

SECOND HERALD: We will present him with a velvet coat

lined with silver fox and will permit him to take part in our royal New Year's procession in our city.

FIRST HERALD: Her Majesty has inscribed here with her own royal hand a message to her people: "Happy New Year! All hail April the First!"

(A flourish of trumpets.)

SECOND HERALD:
Farewell to winter! Babbling brooks
Fill every deep ravine.

FIRST HERALD:
A basketful of snowdrops bring,
Bring to our gracious Queen!

SECOND HERALD:
A basketful of snowdrops pick,
And as you have been told,

FIRST HERALD:
Her Majesty will give to you
A basket full of gold!

FIRST AND SECOND HERALDS *(together)*:
The meadow grass is turning green,
The sun shines bright and clear,
The swallow flying in the sky
Announces spring is here.

SCENE 3

Inside a small house on the outskirts of the city, a hot stove warms the room. Outside, glimpsed through the windows, a snow-storm is raging. The day is drawing to a close. The OLD WOMAN *is kneading*

dough. Her DAUGHTER *is sitting before the fire. Near the girl, on the floor, lie a few baskets. The* DAUGHTER *compares them with one another, first picking up the smallest, then the one next in size, then the biggest.*

DAUGHTER: *(holding the smallest basket):* Do you think, Mother, this basket will hold a lot of gold?

OLD WOMAN: Quite a bit.

DAUGHTER: Enough to buy a fur coat?

OLD WOMAN: Not only a fur coat, my dear—there will be enough for a whole trousseau—for coats and skirts, for kerchiefs and stockings.

DAUGHTER: And how much will this one hold?

OLD WOMAN: That one will hold a lot more. There'll be enough there to buy a fine brick house, a horse and a harness, a ram and a lamb.

DAUGHTER: And this one?

OLD WOMAN: With that one—why!—you'll eat from gold plate, wear clothes with gold brocade, shoes of gold, and gold earrings, too.

DAUGHTER: Then I'll take this one. *(With a sigh.)* But the trouble is you can't get any snowdrops now. The Queen must have issued that proclamation only to make fun of us.

OLD WOMAN: She is young and full of whims.

DAUGHTER: And what if somebody goes to the forest and finds snowdrops there? He'll get a big basketful of gold.

OLD WOMAN: Not a chance! No snowdrops will be seen until spring comes. And look at those snow-drifts—they're almost up to the roof.

DAUGHTER: Yes, but they still may be growing under the snow-drifts. I'll put on my coat and go out to look for them.

OLD WOMAN: No, no, dear, I won't let you step out of the house. Look out of the window—see what a snow-storm is blowing? It'll be much worse before night falls.

DAUGHTER *(grasping the biggest basket):* I said I'm going and I will. To get into the royal palace, attend the Queen's party, and win a whole basketful of gold—it's a chance that comes once in a lifetime!

OLD WOMAN: You'll freeze to death in the forest.

DAUGHTER: Then go to the forest and pick the snowdrops yourself and I'll take them to the palace.

OLD WOMAN: Don't you care at all for your mother?

DAUGHTER: Of course I care for you. But I care for gold, too, and most of all I care for myself. Why don't you go? Haven't you ever been out in a snow-storm before? Wrap yourself up good and warm, and go.

OLD WOMAN: A fine daughter I have, I must say. On a day like this a good master wouldn't drive his dog out into the street, and you're driving out your mother!

DAUGHTER: Drive you out? Not you. You never put yourself to any trouble for your daughter. I can see how I'm going to spend the holiday, thanks to you—sitting by the stove in the kitchen, while others will be riding with the Queen in a silver sleigh and shovelling gold with a spade. *(She cries.)*

OLD WOMAN: Now, now, dear, don't cry. Here, have a pie. *(Taking a pan out of the oven.)* Fresh from the oven, piping hot. D'you hear them sizzling? Just taste one!

DAUGHTER *(through her tears):* I don't want your pies. I want snowdrops! If you don't want to go out yourself and won't let me go, then make Sister do it. She'll be back from the forest pretty soon. Send her out again to get snowdrops.

OLD WOMAN: That's an idea. I don't see why I shouldn't

send her. The forest is near, it won't take her long to pick those snowdrops. If she brings the flowers, you and I will take them to the palace. And if she gets frozen—well, such is her fate. Nobody will shed any tears over her.

DAUGHTER: Certainly not I. I'm sick and tired of her. I can't go outside the gate without hearing our neighbours talking about her: "Oh, the poor orphan!" "Oh, what a girl she is—she has golden hands!" "Oh, how beautiful she is—you can't take your eyes off her." What has she got that I haven't?

OLD WOMAN: Why, darling, you've got everything, if you ask me. But not everybody sees that. She's so sly, you know, lays it on so thick, bowing to this one, smiling at that one. That's why everybody feels sorry for her. "The poor little orphan!" they say. And what is it that the poor little orphan lacks? I gave her my own kerchief—it was quite a good kerchief, I'd worn it less than seven years and had only used it afterwards to cover the kneading-trough. I also gave her your last year's shoes—let her wear them, I'm not mean. And the amount of bread I waste on her—a crust in the morning, a hunk for dinner, a chunk for supper. At the end of a year it all adds up. There are so many days in a year, you know. Any other girl wouldn't know how to thank you enough, but you never hear a word of thanks from that poor little orphan.

DAUGHTER: That's right. So let her go to the forest. She can take the biggest basket—the one I've picked out.

OLD WOMAN: No, no, dear. That's a new basket. I only bought it the other day. We'll give her that one—if it's lost we won't miss it.

DAUGHTER: Pity it's so small.

Enter the STEPDAUGHTER. *She removes her kerchief and shakes off the snow, then walks up to the stove and warms her hands.*

OLD WOMAN: Is it snowing hard outside?

STEPDAUGHTER: So hard you can't tell the ground from the sky—as if you were walking on clouds. I don't know how I managed to get home.

OLD WOMAN: Snow-storms are what you expect in winter.

STEPDAUGHTER: There hasn't been anything like it this year and there won't be again.

DAUGHTER: How do you know there won't?

STEPDAUGHTER: That's simple. This is the last day of the year.

DAUGHTER: Oh, I see! You haven't been so badly frozen, since you can talk in riddles. Have you warmed yourself enough? You have to go somewhere else now.

STEPDAUGHTER: Where to? Is it far?

OLD WOMAN: Not so near, but not too far either.

DAUGHTER: You have to go to the forest.

STEPDAUGHTER: The forest? What for? I've brought enough brushwood to last a week.

DAUGHTER: Who wants more brushwood? You're to get snowdrops.

STEPDAUGHTER *(laughing):* Oh, snowdrops, at this time of the year! Of course! I didn't realize you were joking at first—for a minute I was frightened. There's nothing easier than losing your life today—it just whirls you around and blows you over.

DAUGHTER: I'm not joking. Haven't you heard about the royal decree?

STEPDAUGHTER: No.

DAUGHTER: You don't seem to know anything. Everybody's talking about it in town. Why, the Queen has promised a basketful of gold, a fur-lined coat, and a ride through the city in her sleigh to anybody who brings her fresh snowdrops tonight.

STEPDAUGHTER: This is no season for snowdrops—this is winter.

OLD WOMAN: If it were spring, you wouldn't be offered gold for them, but coppers.

DAUGHTER: Well, no more arguing. Here's your basket.

STEPDAUGHTER *(looking out of the window)*: It's getting dark.

OLD WOMAN: It's your own fault—you shouldn't have stayed so late getting brushwood.

STEPDAUGHTER: Maybe I'd better go tomorrow morning. I'll get up early, at daybreak.

DAUGHTER: Tomorrow morning? I should say not! What if you don't find the flowers till evening? They won't sit waiting for us at the palace—they need the flowers for the New Year's party.

STEPDAUGHTER: I never heard of flowers growing in the forest in winter-time. And how can I see anything in the dark?

DAUGHTER *(munching her pie)*: All you have to do is to bend lower and look sharper.

STEPDAUGHTER: I'm not going.

DAUGHTER: What do you mean?

STEPDAUGHTER: Don't you have any pity for me at all? I'll never get back from the forest.

DAUGHTER: Then am I to go there instead of you?

STEPDAUGHTER *(with drooping head)*: I don't need any gold.

Old Woman: You don't need anything, of course. You have everything you need, and what you lack you know you can get from your stepmother or stepsister.

Daughter: She's the rich one in our family. She can turn up her nose at a whole basketful of gold. Well, are you going or not? Yes or no? No? Where's my coat? *(Choking back her tears.)* Let her warm herself at the stove here and stuff herself with pies, while I wander in the forest till midnight, wading through snow-drifts. *(Snatches her coat from a peg and rushes to the door.)*

Old Woman *(catching her by the skirt)*: Where are you going? Who gave you permission? Sit down, stupid! *(To the Stepdaughter.)* Now, you there, quick! Put your kerchief over your head, take a basket, and run along! And mind you, if I learn you've been sitting it out at some neighbour's, I won't let you back into the house—you can freeze outdoors.

Daughter: Run along and see you don't return without the snowdrops.

The Stepdaughter covers herself with the kerchief, picks up a basket, and goes. There is a pause.

Old Woman *(glancing at the door)*: She wouldn't even shut the door properly. Such a draught! Shut it tight, dear. And lay the table. It's time for supper.

CURTAIN

ACT II

SCENE 1

The forest. Large snow-flakes are falling. It is twilight. The STEPDAUGHTER *is plodding through the deep drifts. She draws her tattered kerchief tighter and blows on frozen hands. It is getting darker. A cushion of snow falls noisily from the top of a tree.*

STEPDAUGHTER *(starting)*: Oh, who's there? *(Glances around.)* It was only a snow cap falling, and I imagined somebody jumped out at me from behind the tree. And who could it be at a time like this? Even the animals are all hiding in their holes. I'm the only one out. *(She moves on, stumbles, gets caught in some fallen trees, and halts.)* I'm not going any farther. I'll stay here. It makes no difference where I freeze to death. *(Sits down on a fallen tree.)* Heavens, it's dark. I can't even see my hands. Where am I? I don't know. I couldn't possibly find my way in the forest or turn back now. So it's death. Life hasn't been very good to me, but even so I'm afraid to die. Perhaps I ought to cry out, call for help. Somebody may hear me—some huntsman or some woodsman going home late. Hullo-o-o! Help! *(Pause.)* No answer. What am I to do now? Just sit here and wait for the end? And what if wolves come? They can smell a human being a long way off. Hush! I hear a sound, like something creeping up. Oh, how frightened I am! *(Walks up to a tree and stares at its thick, knotty, snow-covered branches.)* Shall I climb up? They won't reach me there. *(Draws herself up on to one of the branches and, seating herself in a fork, dozes off. For a while all is still in the forest. Then the* WOLF *peeps out from behind a snow-drift. Glancing*

warily about, he comes forward and, raising his head, begins his lonesome wolf song.)

WOLF:

Oh, the frost is fierce!
How this frost does pierce!
It could nail your tail
To the ice-hard trail!

In the cold the sheep
All sheepskin wear,
The shaggy old bear
Has foot-long hair.
And the foxes pad
In fox coats clad.
Oh, it's just my luck
To be good and stuck
With an old wolf-skin
All ragged and thin.
What a life I've got—
What a cursed lot!

(Pauses and pricks up his ears, then resumes his song.)

Now in den and nest
All have gone to rest,
All the sables sleep,
All the ermines sleep.
In deep thickets or
In their holes they snore.
Lulla, lullaby,
Tasty little hares!

Husha, hushaby,
Chubby little bears!

But no rest for me,
Only misery!
Only misery,
All there is for me.
Weary wolf am I,
Sleep has passed me by.
Be it night or day,
Hunger dogs my way.
Where to look for food
In this frozen wood?
Hunger, frost, and snow—
This is all I know.

(Having finished his song, he prowls around until, sniffing the air, he stops before the STEPDAUGHTER'*s tree.)* Ow-oo-oo! I smell human flesh. Now I'll have a fine supper for New Year's Eve.

The RAVEN *appears on a tree-top.*

RAVEN: Cr-roak! Cr-roak! Watch out, Gr-rey! The pr-rey is not for you. Croak! Croak! Cr-roak!

WOLF: Oh, it's you again, you old croaker? You fooled me this morning but you won't do it this time. My nose will lead me to my supper.

RAVEN: Well, if you have such a good nose, perhaps you'll tell me what's on your r-right, what's on your left, and what's right ahead of you.

WOLF: You think I don't know? A bush on my right, a bush on my left, and a dainty morsel right ahead.

RAVEN: Not on your life, Br-rother! You have a snare on your r-right, poison on your left, and a pitfall r-right ahead. The only r-road left for you is the one going back. Where ar-re you off to, Grey?

WOLF: I run where I please. Mind your own business. *(Disappears behind a drift.)*

RAVEN: Croak! Cr-roak! The grey one has run away. The Wolf is old but I'm older. He's cunning but I'm more so. I'll trick him many a time yet. And you, pretty one, wake up. You mustn't snooze in a frost—or you'll fr-reeze to death.

A SQUIRREL *appears high in the tree and drops a cone on the* STEPDAUGHTER.

SQUIRREL: Don't sleep—or you'll freeze to death.

STEPDAUGHTER: What? Who spoke to me? Who's there? No, I must have imagined it. It was just a cone that fell on me and woke me up. And I was having such a nice dream—it even made me feel warm. Now, what did I dream of? Oh, dear, I can't remember. Oh, yes; I have it. I saw my own mother walking about the house carrying a lamp, and the light shone right in my eyes. *(Raises her head and with her hand brushes the snow off her eyelids.)* Why, I think I see a light—down there, in the distance. But what if that's a wolf's eyes? No, the wolf has green eyes and this is a golden light—it trembles and twinkles like a star caught in the branches of a tree. I'll run to it. *(Jumps off the branch.)* It's still glowing. Perhaps it's a forester's cabin, or woodsmen have lit a campfire. I must get there, I must. Oh, my legs—they're frozen stiff, and I can hardly move. *(She stumbles on through snowdrifts and over fallen trees.)* If only the light doesn't go out!

And it isn't going out! It burns brighter and brighter. I seem to smell smoke. Can it be a campfire? I'm sure it is. Maybe I'm just imagining but I seem to hear the brush-wood crackling in the fire. *(She walks on, pushing her way through the branches of the thick, high fir-trees. It grows lighter and lighter. Reddish reflections keep flitting over the snow and the trees. Suddenly the girl finds herself at the edge of a small round glade in the middle of which a big bonfire is blazing. Around the fire the* TWELVE MONTHS *are seated: three are old men, three middle-aged, three young, and three mere striplings. The young people sit close by the fire, the old ones farther away. Two of the old men wear long white fur coats and shaggy white fur caps; the third one a white coat with black stripes and a white cap trimmed with black fur. The three middle-aged men are dressed in clothes of different colours—one in golden red, another in rusty brown, and the third in buff. The remaining six wear embroidered caftan coats of various shades of green. One of the young men has a fur coat slung over his shoulders, atop his green coat, another has a fur coat hanging from one shoulder. The* STEPDAUGHTER *stops between two fir-trees and, not daring to advance any farther, listens to what the twelve brothers are saying.)*

JANUARY *(throwing an armful of brushwood into the fire)*:

Burn, burn brighter,
Warm the winter air,
Bring a warmer summer,
And a spring more fair.

ALL:

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

JUNE:

Burn with a crackle—

That berries here may grow
In the woods and copses
Covered now by snow.

MAY:

Let the bees make honey
For the world to eat.

JULY:

Let the fields turn golden,
Thick with stalks of wheat.

ALL:

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

Having mustered up courage, the STEPDAUGHTER slowly moves forward into the glade. The TWELVE MONTHS stop singing and turn toward her.

STEPDAUGHTER *(bowing to everybody):* Good evening.

JANUARY: And a good evening to you.

STEPDAUGHTER: I hope I'm not intruding. If not, may I warm myself by your fire?

JANUARY: What do you say, Brothers? Shall we permit her?

FEBRUARY *(shaking his head):* There's never been a case before of a stranger sharing this fire with us.

APRIL: True enough. But I wouldn't grudge it to her.

MAY: Let her warm herself. It won't make our fire any colder.

DECEMBER: Well, come up, my beauty, come up. But mind you don't burn yourself. You see what a fire we have—it fairly blazes.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you, Grandfather. I won't come too close. I'll stand aside. *(She approaches the fire, carefully avoiding*

touching or pushing anybody, and warms her hands.) It's wonderful here! Your fire is so light and hot—it's gone right to my heart. I'm warm now. Thank you.

There is a brief pause. Only the crackling of the fire can be heard.

JANUARY: That's a basket you're carrying, isn't it, my girl? Have you come to gather cones on New Year's Eve, and in such a snow-storm?

FEBRUARY: The forest needs rest too—you can't go on stripping it of everything.

STEPDAUGHTER: I haven't come here of my own free will, nor to pick cones.

AUGUST *(smiling):* Mushrooms then?

STEPDAUGHTER: Flowers, not mushrooms. My stepmother has sent me here to gather snowdrops.

MARCH *(laughing and nudging APRIL):* You hear, Brother? She's come for snowdrops. She's your guest then.

(They all laugh.)

STEPDAUGHTER: I'd laugh with you, too, but I'm past laughter. My stepmother has told me not to come back without snowdrops.

FEBRUARY: What does she want snowdrops for in midwinter?

STEPDAUGHTER: She doesn't want flowers. She wants gold. Our Queen has promised a basketful of gold to anyone who brings her a basketful of snowdrops. That's why she's sent me to the forest.

JANUARY: You're in a bad way, my dear. This is no time for flowers. You'll have to wait for the month of April.

STEPDAUGHTER: I know that, Grandfather. But I had

nowhere else to go. Well, thank you for letting me warm myself and for your kindness. Forgive me if I have intruded on you. *(Takes her basket and slowly walks toward the trees.)*

APRIL: Wait, don't go yet, girl. *(The STEPDAUGHTER halts. APRIL walks up to JANUARY and bows to him.)* Brother January, give me your place for an hour.

JANUARY: I don't mind, but April can't come before March.

MARCH: Don't worry about me. What do you say Brother February?

FEBRUARY: All right, Brother March, I won't argue. I'll withdraw for an hour, too.

JANUARY: That being so, I'll not stand in your way either. *(Strikes the ground with his ice-covered staff.)*

You winter frosts
That crackle and freeze,
Stop gnawing the bark
Of bushes and trees,
Stop chilling the blood
Of hares and crows,
Stop freezing the peasant
And pinching his nose.

(The forest grows still. The storm subsides. Stars cover the sky.) Now it's your turn, Brother February. *(Hands his staff to the lame and shaggy FEBRUARY.)*

FEBRUARY:

Gales and squalls and whirlwinds,
Blow with all your might!
Blizzards, storms, and hurricanes,
Go sweeping through the night!
Weep and roar high in the clouds,
Shake the world below!

Whirl and writhe across the fields—
White snakes in the snow.

(The wind howls in the branches of the trees. Snow-flurries whirl and eddy across the clearing.)

FEBRUARY: It's your turn next, Brother March!

MARCH *(takes the staff):*

Now the snow is darker
And closer to the ground.
The ice is breaking on the lake,
Cracking all around.
The sky looks higher, bluer,
And clouds race faster now;
The merry sparrow twitters,
Perched high upon a bough.
Trails and paths grow darker,
Each day brings brighter dawn,
And all the pussy willows
Put silver earrings on.

(The snow suddenly turns darker on the ground; the spring thaw has set in. The trees begin to bud and so does MARCH's staff.) Now you take the staff, Brother April.

APRIL (takes the staff, which is instantly covered with green young leaves. He speaks in a voice ringing with boyish vigour):

Streams, flow to every side—
Puddles, spread out wide.
Ants, come into the sun—
A warmer time's begun.
The bear trudges along,
The lark sings his song;

And here before the showers,
The early snowdrop flowers.

(Everything in the forest and glade undergoes a marvellous change. The last snow melts away. A carpet of grass covers the glade. Blue and white flowers appear on the hillocks under the trees. All around there is dripping, flowing, and gurgling. The STEPDAUGHTER *stands spellbound.)* Why do you stand still? Make haste. My brothers have given you and me only one hour.

STEPDAUGHTER: But I don't understand what's happened. Can it be true that just for my sake spring has come in the middle of winter? I can't believe my eyes.

APRIL: You can believe it or not, as you please, but hurry up and pick your snowdrops. Or winter will be back before you've filled your basket.

STEPDAUGHTER: Here I go! *(She disappears among the trees.)*

JANUARY *(in a low voice):* I recognized her the moment I saw her. She has the same torn kerchief and worn-out boots she had this afternoon. We Winter Months know her very well. One day she's at the ice-hole with pails, another day in the forest with a sledgeful of brushwood. And she is always so cheerful and pleasant and always singing. But today she's sad.

JUNE: We Summer Months know her just as well.

JULY: We certainly do. Before the sun is up she's down on her knees in the garden pulling out weeds, tying up stems, and picking off caterpillars. Or we see her in the forest taking care not to break a twig needlessly, or picking a ripe berry but leaving a green one on the bush to grow and ripen freely.

NOVEMBER: Many's the time I've drenched her with rain. I'm sorry for that but it can't be helped — that's what an Autumn Month is for.

FEBRUARY: She's seen very little kindness from me, too.

I've made her shiver in the wind, freeze in the cold. Yes, she does know February, and February knows her too. One doesn't mind making a gift of an hour of spring to such as her.

APRIL: Why only an hour? I'd be satisfied to spend my whole life with her.

SEPTEMBER: She's certainly a fine girl. No better housewife is to be found anywhere.

APRIL: Well, if she's agreeable to all of you, I'll give her an engagement ring.

DECEMBER: Go ahead. You're young and it's natural for you to feel the way you do. *(The STEPDAUGHTER returns, carrying a basketful of snowdrops.)*

JANUARY: A whole basketful? You do have quick hands.

STEPDAUGHTER: There are untold numbers of them down there. They are everywhere—on the hillocks and under the hillocks, in clearings and in thickets, under the trees and under the stones. I never saw so many snowdrops in my life. And they're all so big, with such downy, velvety stems, and petals clear as crystal. Thank you, Brother Months, for your kindness. If it weren't for you, I'd have never seen the sun and the spring snowdrops again. As long as there's breath in my body, I'll thank you for every flower I pick, every day I live. *(Bows to JANUARY.)*

JANUARY: Don't thank me. Thank my younger brother April. He pleaded for you and he brought the snowdrops out from under the snow so that you might pick them.

STEPDAUGHTER *(turning to APRIL)*: Thank you, Month of April, I've always welcomed you, and now that I've seen you face to face, I'll never forget you.

APRIL: And to make sure that you don't forget me, here's a ring for you. Look at it from time to time and think of me.

And if you ever find yourself in trouble, throw it on the ground, or into water, or into a snow-drift, and say:

Roll on, my little ring,
On to the porch of spring,
Into the summer hall,
Through autumn's house do roll,
Over winter's carpet white
To the brothers' campfire bright!

And we'll all come to your help—all twelve of us, one after another. Have you remembered what to say?

STEPDAUGHTER: I have. *(Repeats.)*

Over winter's carpet white
To the brothers' campfire bright!

APRIL: Well, good-bye, and take good care of the little ring. If you lose it, you'll lose me.

STEPDAUGHTER: I won't lose it nor shall I ever part with it. To me it will always be the dearest thing I have in the world.

JANUARY: Now I must tell you something. It has come to you, this last night of the old year and this first night of the new, to meet all the Twelve Months at once. August is not due for a long time yet, but here he is standing before you. The April snowdrops won't blossom till several moons from now, but you already have a basketful of them. You've come to us by the shortest road, the others tread the long road—day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute. That's how it should be. So don't disclose or show this short road to anybody. This is a forbidden road.

FEBRUARY: And don't tell anybody who gave you the snowdrops. We ourselves aren't supposed to break the rule, you know. Don't boast about your new friends.

STEPDAUGHTER: I'd sooner die than tell anybody.

JANUARY: That's better. Remember what I've told you and what you've replied. If you remain true to your word, you can come to our New Year's bonfire next year. You'll be a welcome guest.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you, Grandfather. I'll be sure to come now that you've invited me. I'll wait the whole year through, counting the days and hastening the hours.

DECEMBER: But make sure you don't lose your way here. Look at that old oak there, where two pathways fork at right and left. The one that goes to the right leads to us, to the days that will be, but the one to the left leads nowhere at all!

STEPDAUGHTER: Nowhere! How can that be?

FEBRUARY: That's how it is. You will either drown in the snow-drifts, or fall into an ice-hole, or fall prey to the wolf or some other beast of the forest.

APRIL: But fear nothing—now that you have my ring. It will make you warm in a frost, light your way in the darkness, and soothe any sorrow.

STEPDAUGHTER: I can well believe that! I will take it away and cherish it as a souvenir of your bonfire, the fire that makes the whole world warm.

JANUARY: Right you are, pretty lass. Now run along home before I let loose a snow-storm.

STEPDAUGHTER: Good-bye, Brother Months.

TWELVE MONTHS: Good-bye, Little Sister. *(The STEPDAUGHTER runs off.)*

APRIL: Brother January, though I gave her my ring, she can't light up these thickets with just one little star. Ask the moon to light the way for her.

JANUARY: That I will. But where has it gone to? Ho there, Moon, will you please come out from behind that cloud?

(The Moon comes out and pauses over the clearing.) Do me a favour, Moon—show our little guest the way out of the forest so she may get home quickly. *(The Moon sails across the sky in the direction the* STEPDAUGHTER *has gone. There is a brief silence.)*

DECEMBER: Well, Brother January, our wintry spring-time is coming to an end. Take the staff back.

JANUARY: Wait a while. It isn't time yet. *(The glade lights up again. The Moon returns from behind the trees and halts overhead.)* You've seen her home then? Well, thank you, Moon. And now let me have the staff, Brother April. My turn has come.

Hark ye, sisters of the North,
Through your silver gates come forth!
Frost and hurricane and gale,
Fill the earth with moan and wail!
Cover every path with snow,
Make our bonfire blaze and glow,
Let your stormy dance begin,
Set your carrousel a-spin!
Through the woods and fields blow free,
Start your New Year's revelry!

(He strikes the ground with the staff. A snow-storm begins howling and whistling. Clouds race across the sky. Heavy snow-flakes fill the stage.)

SCENE 2

The OLD WOMAN*'s cottage. The* OLD WOMAN *and her* DAUGHTER *are dressing up. A basket filled with snowdrops stands on a bench.*

DAUGHTER: I told you to give her the big new basket and you begrudged it. Now you have only yourself to blame. How much gold will this one hold? A handful or two, that's all.

OLD WOMAN: Who would ever have thought she'd get back alive, to say nothing of bringing snowdrops? It's unheard of. I can't understand where she found them.

DAUGHTER: Haven't you asked her?

OLD WOMAN: I didn't have time. She came home all excited and happy, her eyes shining, her cheeks flushed. You'd think she'd been to a fair, instead of a forest. And no sooner did she put the basket on the table than she slipped behind her curtain. By the time I took a look at what was in the basket she was already asleep—and so soundly you couldn't wake her. The sun is up and she is still asleep. I had to make the fire and sweep the floor myself.

DAUGHTER: I'll go wake her up. In the meantime you can take the big new basket and put the snowdrops in it.

OLD WOMAN: Won't the basket look rather empty?

DAUGHTER: Not if you spread the flowers out. *(Throws the big basket to her.)*

OLD WOMAN: You are a clever girl. *(The DAUGHTER goes off behind the curtain. The OLD WOMAN transfers the snowdrops.)* And how am I to place them to make the basket look full? Maybe I ought to add some earth. *(Takes some flowerpots from the window-sill, shakes out the earth in them into the basket, places the snowdrops in it, and arranges the green leaves from the pots around the basket's border.)* Good. Flowers like earth. And where there are flowers, there are leaves, too. My darling daughter seems to take after me. And between the two of us we have no shortage of brains. *(The DAUGHTER tiptoes*

quickly out from behind the curtain.) Look how I've arranged the snowdrops. Isn't it wonderful?

DAUGHTER *(in a low voice):* Wonderful! You look at this. Isn't this wonderful?

OLD WOMAN: A ring! And such a marvellous one. Where did you get it?

DAUGHTER: Where! I walked in there and began to wake her. She didn't hear a thing. I grabbed her hand, unclenched her fist, and there was this ring shining on her finger. I pulled the ring off quietly but didn't try to wake her—let her sleep.

OLD WOMAN: Ah, so! Just as I thought.

DAUGHTER: What did you think?

OLD WOMAN: It's clear she didn't pick the snowdrops all by herself. Somebody was helping her. There's a poor little orphan for you! Show me the ring, dear. My goodness, how it sparkles! I've never seen one like it in all my life. Put it on your finger, darling.

DAUGHTER *(trying to put it on):* It won't go.

(The STEPDAUGHTER appears from behind the curtain.)

OLD WOMAN *(whispers):* Hide it. Put it in your pocket. *(The DAUGHTER hides the ring in her pocket. The STEPDAUGHTER, her eyes fixed on the floor, slowly walks to the bench, then to the door, and out into the anteroom.)* She's noticed it's missing. *(The STEPDAUGHTER returns, walks up to the basket with the snowdrops, and searches among the flowers.)* What's the idea of crumpling the flowers?

STEPDAUGHTER: Where's the basket I brought the snowdrops in?

OLD WOMAN: What do you want it for? There it is. *(The* STEPDAUGHTER *looks into the basket.)*

DAUGHTER: What is it you're looking for?

OLD WOMAN: She's a great one for looking for things. Whoever heard of anybody finding such a heap of snowdrops in midwinter? Yet she found them.

DAUGHTER: And she argued there were no snowdrops in winter. Where did you get them?

STEPDAUGHTER: In the forest. *(Bends and peers under the bench.)*

OLD WOMAN: For God's sake, what are you looking for?

STEPDAUGHTER: Have you picked up anything in the house?

OLD WOMAN: What could we pick up here? We haven't lost anything.

DAUGHTER: Apparently you've lost something yourself, but are afraid to say what it is.

STEPDAUGHTER: Do you know what it is? Have you seen it?

DAUGHTER: How can I know? You never told me or showed me anything.

OLD WOMAN: If you tell us what you've lost, we may be able to help you find it.

STEPDAUGHTER *(forcing herself to speak):* I've lost a ring.

OLD WOMAN: A ring? But you never had one.

STEPDAUGHTER: I found it in the forest last night.

OLD WOMAN: Aren't you the lucky girl? You find snowdrops—then you find a ring. Quite the little finder, I'd say. So if you look for what you've lost, you're sure to find it. As for my daughter and me, it's time for us to go to the palace. Wrap yourself up well, daughter. It's very cold. *(They dress and preen themselves.)*

STEPDAUGHTER: What do you need my ring for? Give it back to me.

OLD WOMAN: What's that? You're crazy. How can we have it?

DAUGHTER: We've never even caught a glimpse of it.

STEPDAUGHTER: Sister dear, darling, you have my ring. I know it. Don't make fun of me. Give it back to me, please. You're going to the palace. They'll give you a whole basketful of gold there, and you'll be able to buy yourself anything you want. And all I had was this little ring.

OLD WOMAN: Leave her alone, will you? It looks to me as if you didn't find the ring at all, but it was given to you and it's dear to you as a keepsake.

DAUGHTER: Tell me, who gave it to you?

STEPDAUGHTER: Nobody, I found it.

OLD WOMAN: Oh, well, it's no pain to lose what's been easily found. It's not like something you've earned. Come along, dear. Take the basket. They must be waiting for us at the palace. *(The OLD WOMAN and the DAUGHTER go off.)*

STEPDAUGHTER: Mother! Sister! Please wait! They don't even want to listen to me. What am I to do now? Who can I go to? The Brother Months are far away. I can't find them without the ring. And who else will help me? Maybe the Queen, if I go to her palace and tell her what's happened. After all, I picked the snowdrops for her. The Soldier said she was an orphan. Maybe one orphan will take pity on another. No, they'll never allow me to see her if I come with empty hands, without my snowdrops. *(Sits down in front of the stove and gazes into the fire.)* Now it feels as if nothing had ever happened, as if it was all a dream. The snowdrops are gone, the ring is gone. Only the brushwood remains out

of all I've brought from the forest. *(Throws an armful of brushwood into the fire.)*

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

(The fire in the stove flares up and crackles.) It does burn brightly and merrily. As if I were by the campfire in the forest, among the Brother Months. Good-bye, my New Year's good luck. Good-bye, Brother Months.

Farewell, April...

CURTAIN

ACT III

SCENE 1

The throne room in the royal palace. In the centre of the room stands a tall, lavishly decorated fir-tree. Before the door to the interior apartments a crowd of richly attired GUESTS wait for the QUEEN to make her appearance. Among the GUESTS are the AMBASSADORS of the EASTERN and WESTERN KINGDOMS. The MUSICIANS play a fanfare. The door opens and in come the COURTIERS, after them the QUEEN appears, accompanied by the CHANCELLOR, the COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD, a hearty powerful old man, and a tall, bony LADY IN WAITING. PAGES carry the QUEEN's long train. The PROFESSOR, toddling along modestly, brings up the rear of the procession.

EVERYBODY: A happy New Year, Your Majesty! A happy New Year!

QUEEN: Thank you. Every new year is a happy year as

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far as I'm concerned. But the New Year hasn't arrived yet. *(General surprise.)*

CHANCELLOR: However, Your Majesty, today is the first of January.

QUEEN: You're mistaken. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* How many days has December?

PROFESSOR: Exactly thirty-one, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Then today is the thirty-second of December.

LADY IN WAITING *(to the AMBASSADORS)*: This is a delightful New Year's joke by Her Majesty. *(Everybody laughs.)*

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: A very witty remark, more pointed than my sword. Isn't it so, Mr. Royal Prosecutor?

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: The acme of wit.

QUEEN: I'm not joking. *(All stop laughing at once.)* Tomorrow will be the thirty-third of December, the day after tomorrow the thirty-fourth of December. How does it go? *(To the PROFESSOR.)* You continue.

PROFESSOR *(taken aback)*: The thirty-fifth of December. The thirty-sixth of December. The thirty-seventh of December. But it's impossible, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: You're at it again.

PROFESSOR: Yes, Your Majesty, again and again. You can cut off my head, you can throw me in prison, but there's no such thing as the thirty-seventh of December. December has thirty-one days. Exactly thirty-one. It has been proved by science! And seven times eight, Your Majesty, is fifty-six, and eight times eight, Your Majesty, is sixty-four. This, too, has been proved by science. And I value science more than my own head.

QUEEN: Well, well, dear Professor, calm yourself. I forgive

you this time. I've heard somewhere that sometimes monarchs like to be told the truth. All the same, December won't end until a basketful of snowdrops is brought in here.

PROFESSOR: As you wish, Your Majesty. But snowdrops will not be brought here.

QUEEN: We'll see. *(General confusion.)*

CHANCELLOR: I beg leave to present to Your Majesty the Ambassadors Extraordinary of two friendly nations. They have just arrived—the Ambassador of the Western Kingdom and the Ambassador of the Eastern Kingdom. *(The two AMBASSADORS step forward and bow to the QUEEN.)*

WESTERN AMBASSADOR *(he is tall, close-shaven, and baldheaded):* His Majesty, the King of my country, has instructed me to convey to Your Majesty his best wishes for the New Year.

QUEEN: Convey my best wishes to His Majesty, too, if the New Year has already arrived in his country. In my country, as you observe, the New Year has been delayed this year. *(The WESTERN AMBASSADOR bows gracefully, but somewhat confusedly, and steps back.)*

EASTERN AMBASSADOR *(he is short and stout and has a long black beard. He bows to the QUEEN):* My lord and master has ordered me to convey his greetings to Your Majesty and to offer you his congratulations on...

QUEEN: On what?

EASTERN AMBASSADOR (after a pause): On the excellent state of your health and the great wisdom which is so rare at such a tender age.

QUEEN *(to PROFESSOR):* Did you hear? And you're still trying to teach me something.

PROFESSOR: People of wisdom, Your Majesty, learn as long as they live.

QUEEN: They probably have nothing else to do. Kings and queens have too many cares as it is. *(The PROFESSOR sighs and bows. The QUEEN sits down on the throne and with a movement of her hand summons the CHANCELLOR to her side.)* I'm surprised there are still no snowdrops. Does everybody in the city know my decree?

CHANCELLOR: Your Majesty's wish has been fulfilled. Flowers will immediately be cast before your feet. *(He waves a handkerchief. The doors open wide. Enter a procession of GARDENERS carrying baskets, vases, and bouquets of flowers in great variety. The HEAD GARDENER, an important-looking man with side whiskers, presents the QUEEN with a huge basket filled with roses. Other GARDENERS place tulips, narcissuses, orchids, hydrangeas, azaleas, and other flowers around the throne.)*

LADY IN WAITING: What gorgeous colours!

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: A real feast of flowers.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: A rose in the midst of roses!

QUEEN: Are there any snowdrops here?

CHANCELLOR: Very probably.

QUEEN: Please find them for me.

CHANCELLOR *(bends over, puts his spectacles on and with a suspicious air begins to scrutinize the flowers in the baskets; finally picks a peony and a hydrangea):* I believe one of these flowers is a snowdrop.

QUEEN: Which one?

CHANCELLOR: The one you like better than the other, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Nonsense! *(To the PROFESSOR.)* What's your opinion?

PROFESSOR: I regret to say I know only the Latin names of plants. As far as I can recall, this is a *peonia albiflora* and this is *hydrangea opuloides. (The* GARDENERS *shake their heads disapprovingly and resentfully.)*

QUEEN: *Opuloides?* It sounds more like the name of some disease. *(To the* GARDENERS.*)* You tell me what these flowers are.

GARDENER: This is a hydrangea, Your Majesty, and this is a peony or Mary's root, as the country folk call it, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: I don't want any Mary's roots. I want snowdrops. Are there or are there not some snowdrops here?

GARDENER: Your Majesty—how can snowdrops grow in a royal greenhouse? The snowdrop is a wild flower, you might say, a weed.

QUEEN: Where do they grow then?

GARDENER: In their proper place, Your Majesty. *(Contemptuously.)* Somewhere in a forest, under hummocks.

QUEEN: Then bring them to me from the forest, from under the hummocks.

GARDENER: Yes, Your Majesty. Only—please, have mercy on me, Your Majesty—there aren't any snowdrops in the forest at this time of the year. They won't appear before April.

QUEEN: What is this? A conspiracy? Everybody keeps saying April—April. I don't want to hear it again. If I end this day without snowdrops, some of my subjects are going to end it without their heads. *(To the* ROYAL PROSECUTOR.*)* Who do you think is responsible for my not having snowdrops?

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: In my opinion it's the Head Gardener, Your Majesty.

HEAD GARDENER *(falling on his knees):* Your Majesty, I answer with my head only for garden plants. For forest plants the Head Forester is responsible.

QUEEN: Very well. If I don't get snowdrops, I'll order both of you *(she passes a finger across her neck)* to be hanged. My Lord Chancellor, have the death sentence drawn up.

CHANCELLOR: I have everything ready, Your Majesty. All that's left is to put in the name and affix the seal. *(A door opens. Enter an OFFICER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD.)*

OFFICER: Your Majesty, in compliance with the royal decree there has been delivered to the palace a whole basketful of... snowdrops.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: What? Who delivered them?

OFFICER: Two persons of plain rank, sir!

QUEEN: Bring them in—these two persons of plain rank! *(The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER come in, the latter carrying a basket.)* Come here, come here! *(Runs to the basket and tears off the napkin.)* So these are snowdrops?

OLD WOMAN: They are, Your Majesty. Fresh forest snowdrops, right from under the snow-drifts, picked with our own hands!

QUEEN *(both hands full of the blossoms):* Now, these are real flowers, not like your—what do you call them?—opuloides or Mary's roots. *(Pins a bunch to her breast.)* Today let everybody wear snowdrops in their buttonholes or pinned to their dresses. I don't want to see any other flowers. *(To the GARDENERS.)* Out with you!

HEAD GARDENER *(delighted):* Thank you, Your Majesty.

The GARDENERS pick up their flowers and go off. The QUEEN hands out snowdrops to the GUESTS.

LADY IN WAITING *(pinning some to her dress):* These sweet little flowers remind me of the time when I was a tiny thing and used to run about the paths in the park.

QUEEN: You mean to say you were ever a tiny thing and ever ran around in the park? *(Laughs.)* That must have been very funny. How annoying that it was before I was born. Take this, Commander of my Royal Bodyguard.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD *(receiving a snowdrop from the QUEEN)*: Thank you, Your Majesty. I will keep this precious flower in a case of gold.

QUEEN: You'd do much better to put it in a bowl of water.

PROFESSOR: You are perfectly right this time, Your Majesty—a bowl of cool, fresh water.

QUEEN: I am always right, Professor. And this time you have made a mistake. Here is a snowdrop for you, though you say snowdrops do not bloom in winter.

PROFESSOR *(examining the flower closely)*: They do not, Your Majesty. Thank you, all the same.

QUEEN: Oh, Professor! If you were just a schoolboy I should have you stand in a corner to punish you for your mule-headedness. And I wouldn't care which corner, believe me! And this is for you, Mr. Royal Prosecutor. Pin it to your black cloak, it will make looking at you a more cheerful experience.

ROYAL PROSECUTOR *(pinning a snowdrop to his cloak)*: This is the best New Year's gift I've received, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: I'm very glad. From now on I'll present you with a flower every year. Next year it will be a forget-me-not, then a daisy, then a pansy, then a Mary's root. Well, have you all got a snowdrop? Everybody? Splendid. That means a new year has started in my kingdom, too. December is ended. You may offer your congratulations now.

ALL: A happy New Year, Your Majesty. A happy New Year!

QUEEN: A happy New Year! A happy New Year! Light up the tree. I want to dance. *(The lights are lighted on the fir-tree.*

The orchestra strikes up. The WESTERN AMBASSADOR *solemnly and respectfully bows to the* QUEEN. *She gives him her hand. The dancing begins. The* QUEEN *dances with the* WESTERN AMBASSADOR, *the* LADY IN WAITING *with the* COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD. *Other pairs of dancers follow them.)* My dear Ambassador, I wonder if you would mind tripping up my Lady in Waiting? It would be such a jolly sight to see her stretched out in the middle of the hall!

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: I beg to be forgiven, Your Majesty, but I don't think I quite understand you.

QUEEN *(To the* LADY IN WAITING*)*: My dear lady, please be careful! You have just touched the fir-tree with your long train. Oh, your dress has caught fire!...

LADY IN WAITING: Fire? Help! Save me!

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Call the fire brigade!

QUEEN *(laughing)*: It was only my little joke. You're April fools!

LADY IN WAITING: But it isn't April!

QUEEN: Of course it is! Didn't you see my snowdrops? All right, dance along.

LADY IN WAITING *(to the* COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD *as they move away from the* QUEEN*)*: Oh, I'm afraid the Queen may play some wild prank today. You can expect anything from her. She's such an unmannerly little chit.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: My dear lady, haven't you been in charge of her upbringing?

LADY IN WAITING: Oh, what could I do with her? She's taken after her father and mother—inherited her mother's caprices and her father's pranks. In winter she wants snowdrops and in summer she'll demand snow-flakes.

QUEEN: Oh, I'm bored with dancing.

Everybody stops instantly. The QUEEN *proceeds to her throne.*

OLD WOMAN: Permit us to offer you our New Year's greetings, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Oh, you're still here?

OLD WOMAN: Yes, ma'am, we're still here, waiting with our empty basket.

QUEEN: Oh, yes, My Lord Chancellor, order this basket to be filled with gold.

CHANCELLOR: Up to the top, Your Majesty?

OLD WOMAN: As promised, Your Excellency. As much gold as there were flowers.

CHANCELLOR: But their basket contained much more earth than flowers, Your Majesty.

OLD WOMAN: Flowers die without earth, Your Excellency.

QUEEN *(to the Professor):* Is that true?

PROFESSOR: Absolutely, Your Majesty, though it would be more correct to say: plants subsist on soil.

QUEEN: Pay them in gold for the snowdrops. As for the land in my kingdom, or soil, as you would have it, it's already my property. Isn't that true, Mr. Royal Prosecutor?

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: Perfectly, Your Majesty.

The CHANCELLOR *takes the basket and goes off.*

QUEEN *(regarding everybody with a triumphant air):* And so, April hasn't come yet, but snowdrops have already blossomed out. What do you say to that now, dear Professor?

PROFESSOR: I still consider it wrong.

QUEEN: Wrong?

PROFESSOR: Yes, Your Majesty. Such things don't happen.

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: This is indeed an extremely rare and remarkable case, Your Majesty. It would be very interesting to hear how these women found such delightful spring flowers at the coldest season of the year.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: I'm all ears and dying to hear the wonderful story.

QUEEN *(to the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER)*: Go on, tell us where you found the flowers. *(The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER remain silent.)* Why don't you speak?

OLD WOMAN *(to her DAUGHTER)*: You tell it.

DAUGHTER: Tell it yourself.

OLD WOMAN *(steps forward, bows, and clears her throat)*: It's an easy matter to tell the story, Your Majesty. It was a much harder job to find the snowdrops in the forest. As soon as we heard the royal decree, we both decided: we may risk our lives, we may get frozen to death, but we'll fulfil Her Majesty's will. We took a broom and a spade each and went into the forest. With the brooms we swept a path before us, with the spades we dug up the snow-drifts. It was dark and cold in the woods. On and on we went but we got only deeper and deeper into the forest. I could see my daughter was frozen stiff—shivering all over. Now we're done for, I thought to myself...

QUEEN: Well, what happened after that?

OLD WOMAN: After that it was worse than ever, Your Majesty. The snow-drifts grew higher and higher, the cold more and more bitter, the forest darker and darker. I can scarcely remember how we managed to move on—truth to tell, we had to crawl on our bellies!

LADY IN WAITING *(throwing up her arms)*: My, how frightening! On their bellies!

QUEEN: Don't interrupt, please. Go on with your story.

OLD WOMAN: Yes, Your Majesty. So on we crawled and—lo and behold! we came to a wonderful spot. Ah, what a wonderful spot it was! So marvellous-looking, you can't even describe it. The snow-drifts stood higher than the trees, and right in the middle there was a lake—just like a plate it looked, it was so round. The water in it hadn't frozen, there were ducks swimming on it, and its banks were smothered with flowers...

QUEEN: All snowdrops?

OLD WOMAN: All kinds of flowers, Your Majesty. I'd never seen some of them before. *(The CHANCELLOR brings in a basket with gold and sets it down beside the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER. Casting glances at the gold, the OLD WOMAN continues her story.)* The shores there were covered with a carpet of flowers.

LADY IN WAITING: That must have been beautiful! Flowers, birds!

QUEEN: What birds? She never mentioned birds.

LADY IN WAITING *(embarrassed)*: I mean the little ducklings.

QUEEN *(to the PROFESSOR)*: Are ducks birds?

PROFESSOR: Waterfowl, Your Majesty.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Do mushrooms grow there, too?

DAUGHTER: Mushrooms, too.

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: And berries?

DAUGHTER: Strawberries, bilberries, raspberries, blackberries, whortleberries, ashberries...

PROFESSOR: What? Snowdrops, mushrooms, and berries all in the same season? Impossible?

OLD WOMAN: That's the amazing thing about it, Your

Excellency. Quite impossible, but they were—flowers, mushrooms, berries...

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: Are there any plums there?

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: And nuts?

DAUGHTER: Everything is there.

QUEEN *(clapping her hands):* That's wonderful! Go back to the forest at once and bring me some strawberries, nuts, and plums.

OLD WOMAN: My goodness, Your Majesty!

QUEEN. What's the matter? You don't want to go?

OLD WOMAN *(plaintively):* It's such a long journey there, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: It can't be so very long seeing that I signed my decree yesterday and you brought me the flowers today.

OLD WOMAN: That's true, Your Majesty, but we got so frozen on our trip.

QUEEN: Frozen? That's all right. You'll be given a couple of warm fur coats. *(To a SERVANT.)* Bring two fur coats, quick.

OLD WOMAN *(to her DAUGHTER in a low voice):* What are we to do?

DAUGHTER *(in a low voice):* We'll send *her*.

OLD WOMAN *(in a low voice):* Will she find what the Queen wants?

DAUGHTER *(in a low voice):* I'm sure she will.

QUEEN: What are you whispering?

OLD WOMAN: We're saying good-bye to each other, Your Majesty, in case we perish on the way there. You have set us such a difficult task that there's no knowing whether we'll ever return alive. But we obey; we'll try our best. Order them to give us each a fur coat and we'll set out at once. *(Picks up the basket with the gold.)*

QUEEN: You'll be given the coats presently. But leave the gold here for the time being. When you return you'll get two baskets at once. *(The OLD WOMAN puts the basket down, whereupon the CHANCELLOR hastily moves it away.)* And see you get back quickly. We need strawberries, plums, and nuts for our New Year's dinner today. *(SERVANTS hand coats to the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER, who put them on and look each other over.)*

OLD WOMAN: Thank you for the coats, Your Majesty. We need have no fear of the cold in them. They may not be lined with silver fox but they're warm. Good-bye, Your Majesty. Wait for our return with nuts and berries. *(She and her DAUGHTER bow and hurry off to the door.)*

QUEEN: Wait. *(Claps her hands.)* Give me my fur coat, too. Give everybody a fur coat. And have the horses harnessed.

CHANCELLOR: Where do you propose to go, Your Majesty?

QUEEN *(almost bouncing on her throne)*: We are driving to the forest, to that round lake, and there, on the snow, we'll gather strawberries. That'll make something like strawberry ice-cream. Let's go! Let's go!

LADY IN WAITING: I knew it. What a delightful idea!

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: One couldn't think of anything better for a New Year's entertainment.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: The idea is worthy of Haroun-al-Rashid himself.

LADY IN WAITING *(wrapping herself up in a fur cape and coat)*: This is wonderful! Isn't it fun?

QUEEN: Put these two women in the first sleigh. They'll show us the way. *(The QUEEN and her suite continue their preparations.)*

DAUGHTER: Oh! We're done for!

OLD WOMAN *(in a low voice)*: Shut up! Your Majesty!

QUEEN: What is it?

OLD WOMAN: Don't be in such a hurry, Your Majesty. Allow me to tell you something.

QUEEN: Go on.

OLD WOMAN: Your Majesty mustn't go to the forest.

QUEEN: What is there to stop me?

OLD WOMAN: There are terrible snow-drifts there—absolutely impassable.

QUEEN: If you could clear a way for yourself with a broom and a spade, there will be no difficulty in clearing a wide road for me. *(To the COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD.)* Have a regiment of soldiers armed with spades and brooms proceed to the forest at once.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Your wish is my command, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Well, is everybody ready? Let's go! *(Goes to the door.)*

OLD WOMAN: Your Majesty!

QUEEN: I don't want to hear another word from you. You'll keep silent until we reach the lake. You can use your hands to show us the way.

OLD WOMAN: What way? That lake is gone, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: What do you mean?

OLD WOMAN: Just what I said. The lake is gone. It was frozen over before we left it.

DAUGHTER: And buried under mountains of snow.

LADY IN WAITING: What happened to the ducks?

OLD WOMAN: They flew away.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: No waterfowl for us!

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: And what about the strawberries and plums?

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: And nuts?

OLD WOMAN: They're all way down under the snow.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: But at least the mushrooms are still there?

QUEEN: Yes, dried ones. *(To the OLD WOMAN sternly.)* I see you're making fun of me.

OLD WOMAN: Heaven forbid, Your Majesty!

CHANCELLOR: These frauds should be put in chains and thrown into prison, Your Majesty. I saw at once that all they wanted was to wheedle a basket of gold out of us.

LADY IN WAITING: I, too, Your Majesty, guessed from the start that these swindlers were cheating us. Who ever heard of such berries as waffles and bills?

PROFESSOR: Whortleberries and bilberries, My Berry—not waffles and bills.

LADY IN WAITING: I am not Your Berry, but Your Lady, I'll have you know!

PROFESSOR: Oh, I humbly beg your pardon. Whortleberries and bilberries, My Berry, are wild ladies which are found in forests, but of course in summer, not in winter. I pray Your Majesty won't be angry with me, but as I stated before neither berries, nor nuts, nor snowdrops can grow in our climate in the middle of winter.

QUEEN *(tearing the snowdrops off her corsage)*: And what's this?

PROFESSOR *(his voice sinking)*: Snowdrops.

OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER: Snowdrops, Your Majesty, real snowdrops fresh from the forest.

QUEEN *(sitting down on the throne and wrapping herself in her fur coat)*: Well, then, if you don't tell me where you

got them, I'll have your heads chopped off tomorrow. No, today. Right now. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* How do you say it? Don't put off till tomorrow...

PROFESSOR: What you can do today, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Precisely. *(To the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER.)* Well, I'm waiting for your answer. Only I want nothing but the truth. Or you'll find it most unpleasant. *(The COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD grasps the grip of his sword. The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER fall to their knees.)*

OLD WOMAN *(crying)*: We don't know anything ourselves, Your Majesty.

DAUGHTER: We know nothing.

QUEEN: How can that be? You picked a whole basketful of snowdrops and you don't know where?

OLD WOMAN: We didn't pick them.

QUEEN: You didn't? Well, who did?

OLD WOMAN: My stepdaughter, Your Majesty. The wretch went to the forest for me and it was she who brought back the snowdrops.

QUEEN: So she went to the forest, and you went to the palace? Why didn't you bring her with you?

OLD WOMAN: She stayed at home, Your Majesty. Somebody had to look after the house.

QUEEN: Well, you could have looked after your house and sent the wretch here.

OLD WOMAN: It wouldn't have been so easy, Your Majesty. She's afraid to come near people, as if she were a little wild animal.

QUEEN: But I suppose your little wild animal can show us the road to the snowdrops?

OLD WOMAN: I'm sure she can do that. If she found the

way once, she can find it again. Only I don't know if she'll want to.

QUEEN: How can she refuse, if I order her?

OLD WOMAN: She's very stubborn, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: So am I. We'll see who will outstubborn whom.

DAUGHTER: If she refuses, Your Majesty, order her head to be chopped off—that's all.

QUEEN: I know myself whose heads should be chopped off. *(Rises from the throne.)* Well, here's my decision. We're all going to the forest to pick snowdrops, strawberries, plums, and nuts. *(To the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER.)* And you run along home and fetch your stubborn wretch or little wild animal, or whatever you call her. We'll be waiting for you near the palace gates in our sleighs. If you don't come, I'll send the royal guard for you. Hurry now!

OLD WOMAN: Very well, Your Majesty. We'll run home at once. Only why should you freeze in the sleighs? It'll be some time before I get my stepdaughter to obey your will. Go and sit in the sleighs in, say, half an hour.

QUEEN: Half an hour? *(To the PROFESSOR.)* How many minutes are there in half an hour?

PROFESSOR: There are sixty minutes in an hour, Your Majesty. It follows that half an hour has but half the number.

QUEEN: "It follows"! Why don't you answer me plainly? This is not a lesson in arithmetic but a royal reception, and I'm not obliged to divide and multiply here. Tell me now, how many minutes are there in half an hour.

PROFESSOR *(with a sigh)*: Thirty.

QUEEN: And how many seconds?

PROFESSOR: One thousand eight hundred.

QUEEN: Good Heavens! A thousand eight hundred! I know

you—the bigger the number the more pleased you are! All right, I am willing to wait for one thousand seconds. Please stand in a corner, Professor, and count: one, two, three, and so up to one thousand. And you, My Lady, also stand in a corner and ring a golden bell every ten seconds. We'll have some fun at least while we wait. Begin at once! *(The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER run away.)* Count, Professor! Ring the bell, My Lady!

PROFESSOR *(produces a large, egg-shaped time-piece from his pocket)*: One second, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten...

LADY IN WAITING: Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

SCENE 2

The OLD WOMAN's cottage again. Nothing has changed here since the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER left it and went to the palace, except that the embers in the stove are now dying out. The STEPDAUGHTER is sitting on the same bench, either dozing or lost in thought. The door opens noisily and the OLD WOMAN and the DAUGHTER come in.

DAUGHTER *(sweetly)*: Sister darling!

OLD WOMAN: Daughter dear!

STEPDAUGHTER *(looking around)*: Who are you calling?

OLD WOMAN: You, my little dove. Who else?

STEPDAUGHTER: Really? Well, have you been in the palace. Have they given you the gold?

OLD WOMAN: Yes, we went to the palace but they didn't give us a copper!

STEPDAUGHTER: Why not? Didn't they like your snowdrops?

DAUGHTER: Oh, those horrid snowdrops of yours! Because

of them they want to send us to the forest again—to pick strawberries in the snow and to shake nuts and plums off the bare branches. Perhaps you'll go there again? You know the way, after all. What do you say, Sister? *(The STEPDAUGHTER is silent.)* Well, will you go? If you're afraid to go alone, I'll go with you. Why are you silent?

OLD WOMAN: Now listen here, my girl! We have no time to coax you. If you don't stand up for us, they'll take our lives within an hour. But if you save us, you can have anything you want: boots, earrings, fur coats, skirts, ribbons, gold and silver lace—you'll have everything. I won't begrudge anything I have.

STEPDAUGHTER: I can't go there.

OLD WOMAN: Well, there seems to be no way out then!

DAUGHTER: And the minutes are ticking by, one after the other... Oh, Mother, we're done for!

OLD WOMAN: Alas, Daughter darling! I'd go to the forest myself but I have no idea where to go. How will I find the road? Have you a heart of stone? You might at least tell us how to get there. Why can't you do that?

STEPDAUGHTER: I won't tell you.

OLD WOMAN *(embracing her DAUGHTER)*: We're done for, my love. She won't take pity on us and neither will the one in the palace.

DAUGHTER: Oh, Mother, how frightened I am! My heart is cold with fear. Hide me somewhere!

OLD WOMAN: There's no place for us to hide, darling. They'll find us wherever we go.

The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER are silent. The STEPDAUGHTER regards them for a few minutes over her shoulder, then gets up.

STEPDAUGHTER: All right. I'll do my best. Give me a basket.

OLD WOMAN: Oh, our darling dove! You've a heart of gold! Here, take this one, it's the best I have.

DAUGHTER: Is there no bigger basket?

STEPDAUGHTER: It's all the same to me... But tell me, do you have my ring?

OLD WOMAN: Of course. There are no strangers in our cottage. You dropped it and your sister picked it up.

STEPDAUGHTER: Give it to me!

The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER exchange looks.

OLD WOMAN: Good Lord! What bad luck! The Queen took it away from us today—said she'd keep our gold and your ring as well until we brought her fresh strawberries and a basketful of nuts. And she warned us that she'd chop our heads off if we failed her. But she also promised to double the reward if we wouldn't let her down.

STEPDAUGHTER: But how did she find out about my ring?

OLD WOMAN: Your sister is so silly—she put it on her finger to show off in the palace. Fancy that! And your ring, you know yourself, sparkles like fire, and the Queen noticed it at once.

DAUGHTER: Yes, and she took it away from me the moment she caught sight of it. I admit it's my fault. Mother kept scolding me all the way home. But don't be cross with me: the Queen said she would return it—those were her very words.

OLD WOMAN: Why should she want to keep your ring! She has so many of them—right up to her finger-tips!

DAUGHTER *(in a frightened voice):* Why have you sat down

again? Aren't you going? Have you changed your mind? Do you want me to beg you on my knees?

STEPDAUGHTER: A lot of good that would do! You ought not to have taken my ring and given it away to the Queen. I said I'd go and I will go. But what are you dressing for?

DAUGHTER: Why, I'll go with you to the forest to keep you company.

STEPDAUGHTER: Oh no! Either you or I go—not the two of us together.

OLD WOMAN: All right, have it your own way. Go alone if you want to, God speed you. But please hurry. We'll wait for you—oh, how we'll wait for you!

STEPDAUGHTER: Good-bye! *(She goes away. The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER run to the window, and melting the frosted panes with their breath, watch her walk towards the forest.)*

OLD WOMAN: There, she's gone round the corner now. She's not the least bit in a hurry. Run after her, girlie, and I'll go to the palace and tell the Queen that we've sent the pig-headed wretch to the forest. Take care she doesn't see you. Be careful not to step on a dry twig and don't let your boots squeak! You know what a little witch she is—she'll turn back and that'll be the end of it.

DAUGHTER: All right. You don't have to teach me. You better watch when you follow us in the sleighs. There'll be quite a crowd with the Queen, I suppose. Quick, give me a bundle of coloured ribbons!

OLD WOMAN: Whatever for? Are you going to play with your dolls?

DAUGHTER: What a wise mother I have! I'll tie the ribbons on to the trees. Otherwise you'll not find us in the forest.

OLD WOMAN: You're a clever girl!

DAUGHTER: You just called me a little fool. Ha, ha, ha! I'll run after her right away.

OLD WOMAN: Good luck to you, girlie. You follow her, and we'll follow you!

CURTAIN

ACT IV

SCENE 1

The scene is exactly the same as in Scene 1 of Act II. Two SQUIRRELS appear on the branches of a pine- and fir-trees.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Hullo, Squirrel.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Hullo, Squirrel.

FIRST SQUIRREL: A happy New Year to you.

SECOND SQUIRREL: And a merry one to you.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Here's a pine cone for you. Catch it. *(Throws one.)*

SECOND SQUIRREL: Here's a fir cone for you. *(Throws a fir cone.)*

FIRST SQUIRREL: Here's another one.

SECOND SQUIRREL: And another one for you.

RAVEN *(popping out above)*: Croak! Cr-roak! Hullo, Squirrels.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Hullo, Grandpa. A happy New Year to you.

SECOND SQUIRREL: A happy New Year to you, Grandpa. How are things with you?

RAVEN: As ever.

FIRST SQUIRREL: How many times have you celebrated the new year, Grandpa?

RAVEN: Hundr-red and for-rty.

SECOND SQUIRREL: My, my! You are an old raven, Grandpa.

RAVEN: My turn to die is long over-rdue, but death has for-rgotten me.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Is it true, Grandpa, that there's nothing in the world you don't know?

RAVEN: Yes, it's tr-rue.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Then tell us all you've seen.

FIRST SQUIRREL: And all you've heard.

RAVEN: That's too long a story.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Make it short.

RAVEN: Shor-rt? Cr-roak!

SECOND SQUIRREL: No, longer than that.

RAVEN: Croak! Croak! Cr-roak!

FIRST SQUIRREL: We don't understand your Crow language.

RAVEN: That's a pity. You should take lessons in foreign languages.

FIRST SQUIRREL: There are too many different folk in our forest and everybody talks his own language.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Now, I can talk the Hare language a little and I understand the Wolves, but when it comes to Bears and Badgers I can't make out a single word.

RAVEN: You should tr-ry and lear-rn.

The HARE leaps out on to the glade.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Hullo, docktail! A happy New Year to you.

SECOND SQUIRREL: And a merry one.

FIRST SQUIRREL: And on the new frost.

HARE: That's no frost. Why, I'm hot—the snow just melts under my paws. Look here, Squirrels, have you seen our Wolf?

FIRST SQUIRREL: What do you want the Wolf for?

SECOND SQUIRREL: Why are you looking for him?

HARE *(plaintively)*: I'm not looking for him. He's looking for me. I need a place to hide.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Climb up here; it's warm and soft and dry in our hollow! You'll be safe and sound when the Wolf comes around.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Come on, Hare, jump.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Jump up here. Jump up here.

HARE: You think it's funny. But the Wolf is out to get me. He's combing the forest for me, he wants to gobble me up, I see.

FIRST SQUIRREL: That's bad, Hare. And you'd better make yourself scarce. I see the bushes moving—snow being knocked off them. Looks as if you're right about the Wolf.

The HARE disappears. The WOLF comes out from behind a snow-drift.

WOLF: I feel he's here. This time that long-eared coward won't give me the slip—I'll get him. Squirrels, have you seen the Hare?

FIRST SQUIRREL: We certainly have. He has been looking for you everywhere, all over the forest, asking everybody about you: "Where's the Wolf? Where's the Wolf?"

WOLF: I'll show him where the Wolf is. Which way did he go?

FIRST SQUIRREL: That way.

WOLF: But why do his footprints go the other way?

SECOND SQUIRREL: They parted company—the footprints went this way and the Hare that way.

WOLF: Oh, you nutcracking rats, you tail twirlers! Just wait. I'll teach you to make fun of me.

RAVEN: Croak! Cr-roak! Don't threaten, Grey. Better come along with me.

WOLF: You won't fool me, old trickster. You've cheated me twice—I'm not likely to be taken in a third time.

RAVEN: I'll fool you for-rty times more. But today I have no time to waste on you. I'm in a hurr-ry.

WOLF: Where are you going?

RAVEN: To the ice-hole in the lake.

WOLF: It's high time you drowned yourself.

RAVEN: I'm hungry, you see. The fishermen from the village have left their fish on a matting, said they'd come back for it after the holiday.

WOLF: Try that on somebody else, you old trickster!

RAVEN: Suit yourself. I never-r lie. Farewell! Cr-roak! *(He flies away.)*

WOLF: The black wizard is flying away. He can't cheat me—I'll follow him. Oh, how hungry I am! *(Runs away.)*

FIRST SQUIRREL: Do you see anything, Squirrel?

SECOND SQUIRREL: I see Grandpa Raven flying above the tree-tops and Uncle Wolf loping on the ground. And what do you see?

FIRST SQUIRREL: I see two girls come on a visit to our forest.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Who are they?

FIRST SQUIRREL: One is the girl we saw yesterday and the other is a stranger.

SECOND SQUIRREL: I see the first girl but where's the second?

FIRST SQUIRREL: She's hiding behind a bush.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Perhaps it's only the first girl's shadow?

FIRST SQUIRREL: Perhaps. But her shadow is leaving footprints behind it.

SECOND SQUIRREL: Oh, no it isn't. It follows the first girl's footprints.

FIRST SQUIRREL: Well, let her come closer. I'll throw a cone at her or a cap of snow. If she takes fright, we'll know she's no shadow. *(The SQUIRRELS hide themselves. Enter the STEPDAUGHTER.)*

STEPDAUGHTER: There's that hillock and the old oak. I sat on that branch yesterday, before I saw the bonfire. But where are the two pathways the Brother Months told me about: the right one leading to future days and the left nowhere? Perhaps they are covered with snow? No, the blizzards would not dare to touch them. Oh, there they are! They meet by the oak and wind away as far as the eye can see. This path, then, leads nowhere. Anyone who follows it will never be heard of again. Funny that it is smoother and wider and straighter than the other one, and it looks longer. Isn't that a lake I can just glimpse through the trees? The other trail is narrower, rougher, and leads to a precipice. Just to think that if I didn't know better I could have followed the easy path. But no, I must take the difficult one.

The STEPDAUGHTER fastens her kerchief tighter round her head as she steps on the path which leads to the right, not noticing that the

DAUGHTER is creeping up to her. At this moment the FIRST SQUIRREL throws a fir cone at her from the tree and the SECOND SQUIRREL a large snowball. The DAUGHTER screams.

DAUGHTER: E-e-e-k!

STEPDAUGHTER *(with a start):* Who is it? Or am I hearing things? *(She moves the branches apart and sees the DAUGHTER.)* You? Where have you sprung from?

DAUGHTER: Wait! Let me shake this snow off; it's getting down my neck. Oh, what a hard time I had running after you. It's good for you—you know every bush, every tree-stump here.

STEPDAUGHTER: Why did you dog my steps? Didn't we agree that only one of us would go?

DAUGHTER: Mother sent me after you.

STEPDAUGHTER: So that's it. Well, let's go back now, girlie. I'll not go any farther. I took pity on you, but I regret it now.

DAUGHTER: Go back? Not likely. You can't go back now. Do you hear the runners of sleighs squeaking and hoof-beats? They're coming—the Queen with her courtiers, and Mother is with them, too. They'd have caught us up long ago, only the woods are too thick.

STEPDAUGHTER: How did they find their way here?

DAUGHTER: They have me to thank for it. I followed in your steps, leaving coloured ribbons on the trees. *(Laughs.)* I've outwitted you this time, haven't I? Now you've simply got to show this forbidden place of yours, where flowers bloom in the winter and diamond rings lie scattered in the snow.

STEPDAUGHTER: Oh, what a stupid creature I am!

DAUGHTER: You're right there. It will do you no good now to cry over you stupidity. You'll have time for that afterwards.

You can't go back now. Our Queen has a very poor sense of humour!

STEPDAUGHTER *(pauses for a moment, then straightens her kerchief):* I can't go back, you say. All right, I'll go on.

DAUGHTER: It's high time you did. Which way do we go.

STEPDAUGHTER *(pointing to the left):* This way!

DAUGHTER: Very good. This path is straighter and wider. And I'm so tired from tearing through the bushes and sinking in the snow-drifts. *(Stealthily, she ties a ribbon to a branch at the path to the left.)*

The STEPDAUGHTER notes this.

STEPDAUGHTER: You want to leave a ribbon here, too?

DAUGHTER: Of course.

STEPDAUGHTER: I wouldn't if I were you.

DAUGHTER: I know what I'm doing.

STEPDAUGHTER: If you would only listen to me... Please don't follow me down this pathway!

DAUGHTER: Go on, go on. Don't take any notice of me.

STEPDAUGHTER: As you please. Have it your own way. *(She turns to the left. The DAUGHTER follows her. They vanish out of sight. The RAVEN appears on a bough. He waves his wing and shouts after the girls in a hoarse voice.)*

RAVEN: You've chosen the wr-rong r-road! R-r-return, d'you hear-r, r-return at once or you'll per-rish. No luck! They don't understand the language of us ravens, and I don't know theirs. Cr-roak! *(He disappears in the thicket. The COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD, the ROYAL PROSECUTOR and several SOLDIERS, including the OLD SOLDIER appear.)*

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Confound it!

Up to my knees again! The farther we go, the worse it gets. And I see no more ribbons. What if we have lost our way?

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: Nonsense. We are on the right road. Here is material evidence for you. *(Points to a ribbon on a branch.)*

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Right you are. A ribbon indeed! *(To the SOLDIERS.)* Clear the road, hack down the bushes. One-two, one-two! Use your spades! Brrr! It's cold. I'd give anything to be back home, sitting at a jolly fire with a tankard of good wine before me! Confound these snowdrops!

OLD SOLDIER: This is the army, sir.

Enter the QUEEN, followed by the LADY IN WAITING, the PROFESSOR, the CHANCELLOR, the AMBASSADORS, the LADIES, and the OLD WOMAN. Everybody has a basket in his hands: the QUEEN carries a golden basket, the others simpler ones, while the OLD WOMAN drags a great cane basket.

QUEEN *(to the PROFESSOR)*: You told me, Professor, that forests are inhabited by wild animals. But I don't see any animals here. Where are they? Please, show them to me at once.

PROFESSOR: I believe they are sleeping, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: But it is still daylight. Do they go to sleep so early?

PROFESSOR: Many of them go to sleep as early as autumn, Your Majesty, and stay asleep until spring time, when the snow melts away.

QUEEN: There's so much snow here that it may never melt away. I never imagined snow-drifts could be so high. And such strange crooked trees! I like it here. *(To the LADY IN WAITING.)* Do you?

LADY IN WAITING: Oh yes! I'm mad about nature, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Oh, so it's nature's fault. It kept me wondering for a long time. My poor mad lady!

LADY IN WAITING: I beg your pardon, Your Majesty. I only wanted to say that I'm madly in love with nature.

QUEEN: So it's a case of unrequited love! Take a look in the mirror. I can see nature doesn't love you—your nose has turned quite blue. Cover it with your muff.

LADY IN WAITING: Thank you, Your Majesty. You pay so much attention to your humble servant that you forget about yourself. Your nose has also taken on a delicate light-blue shade.

QUEEN: That's natural: I'm cold. Bring me an extra fur coat.

LADY IN WAITING and the other LADIES: And for me, please! And for me! And one for me as well!

One of the SOLDIERS, who are clearing the road with brooms and spades, takes off first his cape, then his fur-trimmed jacket, and tosses them aside. Others follow his example.

QUEEN: I want you to explain this to me. Here we are half-frozen to death, but these men have thrown off even their jackets.

PROFESSOR *(shivering):* Brrr — That's easy to understand, Your Majesty. Movement assists the circulation of the blood.

QUEEN: I don't understand a thing. Movement, circulation of the blood—You'd better call those soldiers. *(Two SOLDIERS come up: one is the OLD SOLDIER, the other is young and clean-shaven. The YOUNG SOLDIER hastily wipes his brow and draws himself up.)* Why did you wipe your forehead?

YOUNG SOLDIER: I beg to be forgiven, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: No, tell me why you did it.

YOUNG SOLDIER: Because of my foolishness, Your Majesty. Please not to be angry with me.

QUEEN: I'm not angry with you. Speak without fear. Why did you wipe your forehead?

YOUNG SOLDIER *(embarrassed)*: I was sweating, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Sweating? What does that mean?

OLD SOLDIER: That's what we common folk say, Your Majesty. He means he felt hot.

QUEEN: Are you hot, too?

OLD SOLDIER: I should say I am.

QUEEN: Why are you?

OLD SOLDIER: From using spade, axe, and broom, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Fancy that! Did you hear what he said, My Lords and Ladies? Everybody—My Lady, Royal Prosecutor, Chancellor—take a spade! And give me a broom somebody. Let everyone take a broom, a spade, or an axe!...

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: My Lady, permit me to show you how to hold the spade. You dig with it this way.

LADY IN WAITING: Thank you. It's a long time since I did any digging.

QUEEN: I didn't know you ever did any digging.

LADY IN WAITING: Oh, yes, Your Majesty. I used to have a sweet green little pail and a spade.

QUEEN: Why did you never show them to me?

LADY IN WAITING: I lost them in the park when I was three years old, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Then you're not only mad but extremely absent-minded. Do you blame that on nature, too? Take a broom now but don't lose it—it belongs to the Crown.

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: And what are we to do, Your Majesty?

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Forward march! Coachmen, bring up the rear!

Everybody leaves the stage except the PROFESSOR, who goes up to the footlights and speaks in a sad, thoughtful voice.

PROFESSOR: In winter, I still believe, there is snow in the forest but no snowdrops, there are nut-trees but no nuts, and since we cannot go home without snowdrops, nuts, and strawberries—ergo: we shall never return home!

SCENE 2

A snow-bound lake in the forest. The STEPDAUGHTER climbs down to it. After her slides the DAUGHTER.

DAUGHTER: I barely managed to catch up with you. You feel quite at home among these snow-drifts. I'm only half alive. What a horrible path it is! First I fell into a pit, then I nearly lost an eye when I bumped into a sharp twig, then I heard a wolf howl behind me. And you walked on and on and paid no attention to me.

STEPDAUGHTER: That's what you wanted, wasn't it?

DAUGHTER: Yes, but I'm half dead with fright now.

STEPDAUGHTER: It may be worse farther on.

DAUGHTER: Oh, please don't frighten me!

STEPDAUGHTER: I'm not trying to frighten you. That's the truth. You had better go back and tell them to get out of the forest as fast as they can before something terrible happens to them.

DAUGHTER: No, I'm afraid to go back. Either a wolf will eat me or the Queen will have me hanged. Is the end in sight?

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, I think the end is in sight.

DAUGHTER: You're frightening me again. I want to know whether it's a long way to the place where the flowers grow.

STEPDAUGHTER: A longish way. Three or four months at least.

DAUGHTER: But you picked flowers only yesterday!

STEPDAUGHTER: Yesterday is even farther away—you will never catch up with it, you can never return it.

DAUGHTER: How strangely you speak! I don't understand a word. Where does this path lead.

STEPDAUGHTER: Don't you see? Across the lake and up the hill.

DAUGHTER: And then?

STEPDAUGHTER: Nowhere.

DAUGHTER: Horrors! I wish they'd overtake us—Mother and the Queen with her soldiers. The more people there are the less reason there is to be afraid. Halloo!

VOICES FROM THE THICKET: Halloo! Halloo!...

Enter the SOLDIERS, clearing the way.

OLD SOLDIER (*catching sight of the STEPDAUGHTER*): Why, it's you, my pretty lass! So we meet again in this forest. Last time, at least, we knew why we had come here—you came to gather brushwood, I came to cut a fir-tree. But now we are going nobody knows where, looking for nobody knows what.

STEPDAUGHTER: You had better go back. This is a dangerous road.

OLD SOLDIER: You're right there. Even the horses don't want to go any farther and are trying to turn back. But we have to push on and on God knows where. Who's this girl with you—a friend?

DAUGHTER: I'm her sister.

OLD SOLDIER: Well, if that's so you might give your sister

at least one of the three kerchiefs you've tied about your head. Look how blue her nose is.

DAUGHTER: I'm cold, too. Though not from the frost but from fear. She's frightened me to death. I'm glad you're here now. Where are the others?

OLD SOLDIER: They'll be here soon. D'you hear all that noise in the bushes? *(To the STEPDAUGHTER.)* Here, dearie, take my mittens. Quick, pull them on. They'll warm your hands for you.

VOICES FROM BEHIND THE TREES: This way, please. Climb down carefully. Hold on to the bushes. Watch out, Your Majesty.

OLD WOMAN *(entering first)*: My goodness! A lake! Well, well! It just goes to show that the more you lie the more truth there creeps into your lies. Your Majesty, there's a lake here. And here are my daughter and stepdaughter. We've caught up with them at last.

QUEEN *(descending to the ice)*: At long last! Now, My Lady, you may be sure that you'll return to the palace in time for your tea. We've found the little wild animal that knows where flowers bloom in winter.

PROFESSOR: In hothouses and the torrid zone.

QUEEN: We'll see about that now. Bring the girl here. So that's what the little forest animal looks like! I thought you were shaggy and bandy-legged, but you turn out to be very beautiful. *(To the CHANCELLOR.)* Don't you think so, My Lord?

CHANCELLOR: In the presence of my Queen I see no one else.

QUEEN: Oh, that's because your glasses are covered with hoar-frost. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* And what have you to say?

PROFESSOR: I believe that when it is winter in a land with a temperate climate...

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: Do you call this a temperate climate?

There's nothing temperate about it! It's a Polar climate!

PROFESSOR: I beg your pardon, Your Excellency, but Geography is against you there. As I was saying, the inhabitants of a country with a temperate climate wear warm clothes of furs and down in winter.

QUEEN: What are you driving at, Professor?

PROFESSOR: I only wish to say that this beautiful girl is sorely in need of warm clothes. Look at her, she's frozen!

QUEEN: This time you're right, though you might have put it in fewer words. You make use of every occasion to teach me a lesson in Geography, Arithmetic, or even singing. Get her a coat of furs and down, or to put it plainly, a fur coat and a warm shawl. That's right, now put it on her.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you.

QUEEN: You'll have to thank me again. This very day you'll receive a basket of gold, twelve velvet dresses, satin shoes with silver heels, a bracelet for each arm, and a diamond ring for each finger. Do you want this?

STEPDAUGHTER: No, thank you. I don't want anything.

QUEEN: Nothing at all?

STEPDAUGHTER: I want only one little ring—not ten of your rings, just my own ring.

QUEEN: What ring?

STEPDAUGHTER: The one you took from my stepsister.

QUEEN: What is she saying?

OLD WOMAN: She's raving, Your Majesty.

DAUGHTER: She doesn't know what she's talking about.

STEPDAUGHTER: Oh, yes, I do. So you've deceived me! You told me the Queen had taken away my ring, but you had it all the time!

OLD WOMAN: What nonsense! Come to your senses! What ring?

QUEEN: We'll soon see what ring it is. Hand me that ring, will you?

OLD WOMAN: Your Majesty...

QUEEN: Hand me the ring, or else!

OLD WOMAN: We don't have it.

DAUGHTER: We left it at home.

QUEEN: Well, run back and fetch it. And don't keep us waiting if you know what's best for you.

DAUGHTER: What? Go home for it? Oh no! I'll look in my pockets, perhaps I've put it there.

OLD WOMAN: Look carefully, girlie!

DAUGHTER: Here it is, Your Majesty. Please take it.

QUEEN: What a lovely ring it is. Where did you get it?

STEPDAUGHTER: It's a present.

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: Who gave it to you?

STEPDAUGHTER: That I can't tell you.

QUEEN: With you everything is either a mystery or a riddle. All right, you can take your ring.

STEPDAUGHTER: Really? Thank you, thank you ever so much.

QUEEN: You can have it—if you show me where you found the snowdrops yesterday. And be quick about it, too!

STEPDAUGHTER: Then I won't take the ring.

QUEEN: What? You don't want it? Then you'll never see it again. I'm going to toss it into the water, into that ice-hole. Aren't you sorry for it? Perhaps I'm sorry for it, too, but there's nothing else I can do. Well, tell me where the snowdrops are... One-two-three!... *(Swings her arm and throws.)*

STEPDAUGHTER *(crying)*: Oh, my little ring!

QUEEN: You thought I really threw it, did you? No, it's still in my hand. Tell me where the snowdrops are and I'll give it

to you. Well, will you stop being pig-headed? Take away her coat and shawl.

DAUGHTER: Let her freeze.

OLD WOMAN: It serves her right.

SERVANTS remove the STEPDAUGHTER's fur coat and shawl. The QUEEN struts about, raging. The courtiers follow her with their eyes.

PROFESSOR: Your Majesty!

QUEEN: Well?

PROFESSOR: This act is unworthy of you, Your Majesty! Order them to return to this maiden the fur coat you gave her and the ring which she seems to value so much. And let us go home. Your stubbornness, if you will pardon my saying so, will lead to no good, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Do you dare call *me* stubborn?

PROFESSOR: Whom else, Your Majesty?

QUEEN: Who's the Queen here—you or me? Do you dare to take the side of this wilful girl and be insolent with your Queen? Have you forgotten that "hang" is a shorter word than "pardon"?

PROFESSOR: Your Majesty!...

QUEEN: No, no, no! I don't want to listen to you. I'll order the ring to be thrown into the ice-hole together with the girl and with you, Professor! *(She turns abruptly to the STEPDAUGHTER.)* For the last time I ask you—will you show me where the snowdrops are? No?

STEPDAUGHTER: No!

QUEEN: Then say good-bye to your ring and to your life, too. Seize her! *(With a single movement throws the ring into the water.)*

STEPDAUGHTER *(darting forward)*:

Roll on, my little ring,
On to the porch of spring,

Into the summer hall,
Through autumn's house do roll,
Over winter's carpet white
To the brothers' campfire bright!

QUEEN: What's that? What is she saying?

A snowstorm begins. Flakes blow across the stage. The QUEEN, the COURTIERS, the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER, the SOLDIERS, and the SERVANTS try to cover their heads and faces from the blizzard. Through the noise of the storm, JANUARY's tambourine, FEBRUARY's horn, MARCH's bells are heard. Together with the whirling snow vague white figures rush by. They may be the winds or they may be the Winter Months themselves. As they whirl, they carry the STEP-DAUGHTER with them until she disappears.

QUEEN: Come here! Help! Quick!

The wind spins her and everybody else on the stage. People fall, rise, grasp one another, gathering in a knot.

VOICE OF THE LADY IN WAITING: Hold me!

VOICE OF THE OLD WOMAN: Daughter dear, where are you?

VOICE OF THE DAUGHTER: I don't know myself. I'm lost! Oh, why did I go along that horrid path!

VOICES:

Let's go home!
Home!
Get the horses!
Where are the horses?
Coachman! Coachman!

Crouching low to the ground, everybody grows silent. Through the noise of the wind, with increasing frequency, break the sounds of the MARCH bells and, later, of the APRIL reed-pipes. The storm subsides.

Sunshine returns. Birds chirp. Everybody raises his head and gazes about with surprise.

QUEEN: Spring has come!

PROFESSOR: It's impossible!

QUEEN: How do you mean "impossible" when leaves are budding on the trees?

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: So they are indeed. And what are these flowers?

QUEEN: Snowdrops! Everything has come out just as I wished. *(Runs up a hillock which is covered with flowers.)* Wait. Where's that girl? Where has your stepdaughter gone to?

OLD WOMAN: She's run away, the wretch!

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: Look for her!

QUEEN: I don't need her any more. I've found snowdrops myself. Just look what a lot of them! *(Greedily pounces upon the flowers. Darting from place to place, she leaves the crowd and suddenly comes face to face with a huge* BEAR, *who has evidently just climbed out from his den.)* O-o-oh! Who are you?

The BEAR *leans towards her. The* OLD SOLDIER *and the* PROFESSOR *rush to the rescue. As he runs the* PROFESSOR *shakes an admonishing finger at the* BEAR. *All the others scatter. The* LADY IN WAITING *screams piercingly.*

PROFESSOR: Now, now! Shoo! Shoo!... Begone!

OLD SOLDIER: Now don't get tough, fellow!

The BEAR, *looking right and left, lumbers away into the thicket. The* COURTIERS *rush back to the* QUEEN.

QUEEN: Who was it?

OLD SOLDIER: Old Browny, Your Majesty.

PROFESSOR: Yes, the brown bear, known to the Latins as

Ursus. It seems that he had been awakened by this early spring —or thaw, rather.

QUEEN: I have a hundred bears in my palace—plush, velvet, rubber, gold, and bronze. But that one was not at all like them.

PROFESSOR: It would be more correct to say that your toy bears do not resemble the original *Ursus*.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Did this *Ursus* fellow do any harm to Your Majesty?

THE ROYAL PROSECUTOR: He did not hurt you?

LADY IN WAITING: He did not scratch you?

QUEEN: No; he only whispered a few words in my ear. They concern you, My Lady.

LADY IN WAITING: Me? What did he tell you about me, Your Majesty?

QUEEN: He asked why it was that you screamed while I did not. He was very much surprised.

LADY IN WAITING: I screamed out of fear for you, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Really? Go and tell that to the Bear.

LADY IN WAITING: I confess, Your Majesty, that I'm terribly afraid of mice and bears.

QUEEN: Come and pick snowdrops then, will you? They don't bite.

LADY IN WAITING: I don't see them...

CHANCELLOR: Where are they?

QUEEN: They've vanished.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Great Scot! There are berries instead!

OLD WOMAN: Please look, Your Majesty—strawberries, bilberries, whortleberries, raspberries—just as we told you!

LADY IN WAITING: Oh, those bills and waffles. How beautiful!

DAUGHTER: You see yourself we told the truth.

The sunshine grows more and more blazing. Bees buzz and the chirping of grasshoppers is heard. Summer is in full swing. JULY'S *psaltery is heard in the distance.*

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD *(panting):* I can't breathe! It's too hot! *(Opens his fur coat.)*

QUEEN: What is it—summer?

PROFESSOR: That's impossible.

CHANCELLOR: Nevertheless, it is a fact. Real July weather.

WESTERN AMBASSADOR: It's as torrid as a desert.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: No, it's cooler in our deserts.

Everybody throws off his fur coat, fans himself with a handkerchief, sinks to the ground.

LADY IN WAITING: I think I have a sunstroke. Water! Water!

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: Water for Her Ladyship.

Thunder. Rain comes down in sheets. Leaves are blown from the trees. Instantly autumn comes into its own.

PROFESSOR: It drizzles!

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: Drizzles? It is raining cats and dogs!

OLD SOLDIER *(with a water flask):* Here's water for Her Ladyship.

LADY IN WAITING: I don't want water. I'm drenched as it is.

OLD SOLDIER: That's true.

QUEEN: Bring me an umbrella.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: How can I get an umbrella, Your Majesty, when we left the palace in January, and now it must be *(he looks around)*—September.

PROFESSOR: Impossible.

QUEEN *(wrathfully):* There are no months in my kingdom and never will be. It was my Professor who conjured them up.

ROYAL PROSECUTOR: As you wish, Your Majesty. We'll outlaw them.

It turns dark. A sudden hurricane sweeps the scene, bringing down trees and carrying away the fur coats and shawls that were thrown on the ground.

CHANCELLOR: What's going on? Is it an earthquake?

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: The heavens are crashing down!

OLD WOMAN: Help!

DAUGHTER: Mother!

The wind blows out the LADY IN WAITING's voluminous dress, and, barely touching the ground with her feet, she sails away after the leaves and coats.

LADY IN WAITING: Save me! Catch me! I'm flying away!

The darkness increases.

QUEEN *(her arms clasped around the trunk of a tree):* Back to the palace at once! Bring the horses here! Where are you all? Let's drive away.

CHANCELLOR: We can't drive back, Your Majesty. We came here in sleighs and the snow has since been washed away.

COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: In such mud the only way to get home is on horseback.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: That's an idea! *(Runs off. The WESTERN AMBASSADOR, the ROYAL PROSECUTOR, and the COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD follow.)*

QUEEN: Where are you going? Stop! Stop, I tell you! I'll hang you all!

No one obeys her.

WESTERN AMBASSADOR *(running):* Your Majesty will forgive me but I can be executed only by orders of my Emperor.

EASTERN AMBASSADOR: And I only by orders of my Sultan. *(Runs off.)*

VOICE OF THE ROYAL PROSECUTOR *(off stage):* Put me astride the horse. I don't know how to ride.

VOICE OF THE COMMANDER OF THE ROYAL BODYGUARD: You'll learn!

There is a clatter of hoofs. Only the QUEEN, the PROFESSOR, the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER, and the OLD SOLDIER remain on the stage. The rain stops. White flakes fly about.

QUEEN: Look—snow! Winter is on again.

PROFESSOR: At last! That's very probable. After all, it's January.

QUEEN *(shivering):* Give me a fur coat. It's cold.

OLD SOLDIER: I should say it is, Your Majesty. It's the worst thing to get wet first and frozen afterwards. Only, Your Majesty, the wind has blown all the fur coats away. They were made of light stuff, Your Majesty—ermine and down—and the gale was fierce.

A wolf howls nearby.

QUEEN: Do you hear that? Is it the wind?

OLD SOLDIER: No, Your Majesty. The wolves.

QUEEN: How horrible! Order the sleighs to be brought back. It's winter now, so we can drive in sleighs again.

PROFESSOR: That's perfectly correct, Your Majesty. In winter people ride in sleighs and *(he sighs)* sit by the fire.

The OLD SOLDIER goes off.

OLD WOMAN: I told you not to go to the forest, Your Majesty.

DAUGHTER: She fancied snowdrops!

QUEEN: And you wanted gold! *(After a pause.)* But how dare you speak to me like that?

DAUGHTER: She's offended!

OLD WOMAN: We're not in the palace but in the forest, Your Majesty.

The OLD SOLDIER returns, drawing a sleigh.

OLD SOLDIER: Here's the sleigh, Your Majesty. You can sit in it, if you wish, but there's nothing to pull it.

QUEEN: Where are the horses?

OLD SOLDIER: The gentlemen from your suite have galloped off on them. There's not a single horse left.

QUEEN: I'll show those gentlemen what's what if I ever get back to the palace. But how am I to get there? *(To the PROFESSOR.)* Well, won't you tell me? You're supposed to know everything.

PROFESSOR: Unfortunately, far from everything, Your Majesty.

QUEEN: But we'll die here. I'm shivering and sore all over. Pretty soon I'll be frozen to the marrow... Oh, my ears and nose! My hands are frozen stiff.

OLD SOLDIER: You ought to rub your ears and nose with snow, Your Majesty, or you'll be frostbitten indeed.

QUEEN *(rubbing her ears and nose with snow)*: Why on earth did I sign that idiotic decree?

DAUGHTER: Idiotic is the word for it. If you hadn't signed it, we'd be sitting at home by the fire now celebrating the New Year. Instead we're freezing to death here—no better than dogs.

QUEEN: Why did you pay attention to every foolish word of mine? Didn't you know that I'm not of age yet? Fancied

a sleigh ride with the Queen? *(Hops from one foot to the other.)* I can't bear it any longer. Oh, it's freezing! *(To the PROFESSOR.)* Think up something, can't you?

PROFESSOR *(breathing on his hands)*: That's a difficult problem, Your Majesty. Now, if we could harness somebody to the sleigh...

QUEEN: Whom?

PROFESSOR: A horse, for example—or even a dozen draught-dogs...

OLD SOLDIER: Where will you get dogs in a forest? As the saying goes, a good master wouldn't drive his dog out in weather like this.

The OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER sit down on a fallen tree.

OLD WOMAN: Oh, we'll never get out of here! I'd set out on foot, but my feet are turned to icicles!

DAUGHTER: Oh, we're lost!

OLD WOMAN: Oh, my poor feet!

DAUGHTER: Oh, my poor hands!

OLD SOLDIER: Quiet! Somebody's coming.

QUEEN: That's for me.

OLD WOMAN: Huh! As if everybody thought only about her!

Enter a tall old man in a white fur coat. It is JANUARY. He looks around and knocks on the trunks with the air of a good manager. A SQUIRREL peeks out of a hollow; he wags his finger at it, and it pops back. Noticing the uninvited visitors, he walks up to them.

JANUARY: What's brought you here, my friends?

QUEEN *(plaintively)*: We've come to pick snowdrops.

JANUARY: This is not the season for snowdrops.

PROFESSOR *(shivering)*: Perfectly right, too.

RAVEN *(from his tree-top)*: R-r-right!

QUEEN: I realize myself we came here at the wrong time. Tell us how to get out.

JANUARY: The same way you came in.

OLD SOLDIER: Pardon me, old man, but we drove here with horses and since then they've raced away without us. You can't catch up with them on wings. You seem to be a local man, isn't that right?

JANUARY: Local in winter, far distant in summer.

QUEEN: Do help us, please. I'll reward you royally. I can give you gold, silver—anything you want.

JANUARY: I don't need it. I have everything. I have more silver than you ever saw in your life. Look. *(He lifts his arm. The snow begins to glitter everywhere, sparkling with silver and diamonds.)* As for gifts, you'd better tell me what I can do for you. Tell me what you want for the New Year, what your wishes are.

QUEEN: All I want is to get back to the palace. Only we have nothing to pull our sleigh.

JANUARY: You'll have it. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* And what's your wish?

PROFESSOR: I should like everything to be back in its right place and time—winter in winter, summer in summer, and we in our homes.

JANUARY: I'll see to that. *(To the OLD SOLDIER.)* And what do you want, Soldier?

OLD SOLDIER: What do I need? To warm myself by a camp-fire, that's about all. It's blasted cold here.

JANUARY: You'll warm yourself. There's a fire nearby.

DAUGHTER: As for us, give us a fur coat, Mother and me.

OLD WOMAN: Take it easy, girl. What's the hurry?

DAUGHTER: What's the good of waiting? Let's get a fur coat quick, right away—any fur coat, even dog-fur.

JANUARY (*pulling two dog-fur coats from under his coat*): Hold them!

OLD WOMAN: Forgive me, sir, but we don't want these fur coats—she didn't mean what she said.

JANUARY: What was said was said. Put on the coats. Let them last you a lifetime.

OLD WOMAN (*holding one of the coats*): You *are* a fool! If you wanted a fur coat, you might have asked for a sable.

DAUGHTER: You're a fool yourself. You should have told me that in time.

OLD WOMAN: And not only didy ou get yourself a dog-fur coat, you've forced one on me.

DAUGHTER: If you don't like it, give it to me, I'll be warmer with two. And you can freeze to death here under a bush—for all I care.

OLD WOMAN: Give it to you? Not on your life! (*The two put on their coats, muttering.*) Couldn't think before she spoke! And what did she get us? A dog-fur coat!

DAUGHTER: Dog-fur just suits you. You bark like a dog.

OLD WOMAN: You're a dog yourself!

Gradually their voices turn into a bark and they themselves, once their coats are on, become dogs: the OLD WOMAN a smooth, black-haired dog with touches of grey; the DAUGHTER shaggy and red-haired.

QUEEN: Oh, the dogs! Hold them! They'll bite us!

OLD SOLDIER (*breaking off a branch*): Don't worry, Your Majesty. We have a saying—teach the dog with a stick.

PROFESSOR: Properly speaking, dogs are excellent draught animals. The Eskimos use them for long journeys.

OLD SOLDIER: You're right there. We can harness them to the sleigh—let them pull it. Pity there are only two of them. We need a dozen.

QUEEN: These two are worth any dozen. Harness them up quick! *(The OLD SOLDIER harnesses the dogs. Everybody climbs into the sleigh.)*

JANUARY: Now you'll have a New Year's sleigh ride. Well, happy journey! Get going, Old Soldier—toward the little light. There's a campfire there. When you reach it, you'll be able to warm yourself.

SCENE 3

The forest glade. Sitting around the campfire are the TWELVE MONTHS and the STEPDAUGHTER. The MONTHS take turns throwing brushwood into the fire.

APRIL:

Burn, campfire, burn!
Warm the deep-buried roots,
Send the sap up the trunks
To the leaves and the shoots.
Let the resin in the pine
Fill the air of spring with wine.

TWELVE MONTHS:

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

JANUARY *(to the STEPDAUGHTER)*: Well, dear guest, you may throw in some brushwood, too. It'll make the fire burn brighter still.

STEPDAUGHTER *(throwing an armful into the fire):*

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

JANUARY: You're hot, aren't you? Your cheeks are burning.

FEBRUARY: Nothing surprising, seeing she's come straight from the frost to such a fire. With us, both frost and fire are fierce, one hotter than the other. Not everybody can stand that.

STEPDAUGHTER: I don't mind. I rather like a blazing fire.

JANUARY: We know that. That's why we've let you sit by ours.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you. Twice you've saved my life. But I am ashamed to look you in the eyes. I lost your ring...

APRIL: Really? Guess what I have in my hand.

STEPDAUGHTER: The ring!

APRIL: Right the first time. Take your ring. It's a good thing you decided to sacrifice it today. Otherwise you'd never have seen either it or us again. Wear it and you'll always have warmth and light, whether there's a winter frost, or a storm, or an autumn mist. Although they say April is a fickle month, the April sun, take it from me, will never deceive you.

STEPDAUGHTER: Ah, this lucky little ring of mine. It has come back to me after all. It was dear to me before, it'll be dearer still now. Only I'm afraid to return home with it—they may take it away from me again.

JANUARY: No, that won't happen again. There's nobody to take it away. You'll go back to your home and be mistress of the house yourself. Then we shall be your guests for a change.

MAY: We'll stay with you in turn. And each will bring his own gift.

SEPTEMBER: We Months are rich folk. All men have to do is to learn how to earn our gifts.

OCTOBER: In your garden you'll have such trees, such flowers, berries, and fruit as have never been seen in this world.

Enter the BEAR, *carrying a great coffer.*

JANUARY: In the meantime, here is a coffer for you. It would hardly be right if we Brothers sent you home empty-handed.

STEPDAUGHTER: I can't find words to thank you.

FEBRUARY: You'd better open the coffer and see what's in it. We may not have put in things that you like.

APRIL: Here's the key. Open it.

STEPDAUGHTER lifts the lid and examines the gifts. They include fur coats, silver-embroidered dresses, silver shoes, and piles of other brightly coloured garments.

STEPDAUGHTER: Oh, I simply can't take my eyes off these things. I saw the Qeen today, but even she didn't have such dresses or fur coats.

DECEMBER: Well, why not try them on?

The MONTHS *surround the* STEPDAUGHTER. *When they step aside, she is seen wearing a new coat, a new dress, and new shoes.*

APRIL: You do look beautiful! Both the dress and the coat suit you right down to the ground. So do the shoes.

FEBRUARY: It would be a pity, though, to tramp over the forest trails and through the brushwood in such shoes. I see I'll have to give you a sleigh as well. *(Claps his hands.)*

Ho, there, my forest folk! Bring me a bright new sleigh, with smooth silver runners and soft sable rugs!

A number of forest animals—the FOX, *the* HARE, *the two* SQUIRRELS *—push forward a white, carved sleigh with silver runners.*

RAVEN *(from a tree):* A wonder-rful sleigh—wonder-rful r-runners!

JANUARY: You're right, old fellow, this is a fine sleigh. It's not every horse that you can harness to it.

MAY: Don't worry about horses. I'll give her horses to match the sleigh. My fiery steeds are shod with gold they paw the earth and thunder rolls! *(Claps his hands. The* HORSES *appear.)*

MARCH: What splendid horses! Whoa, there! They'll give you a fine drive but it won't be much fun without silver bells. Well, so be it—you'll have my bells. The more tinkle, the merrier the journey. *(The* MONTHS *surround the sleigh, harness the* HORSES*, put the coffer in. Meanwhile, the hoarse barking and growling of* DOGS *drift on from the distance.)*

VOICE OF THE OLD SOLDIER: Come on! Come on! Get a move on, you dogs! I'll give you bones if you drive us home. And stop snarling at each other!

VOICE OF THE PROFESSOR: My, it's cold. And they're so slow!

VOICE OF THE QUEEN: Run them for all they're worth! *(Pitifully.)* I'm frozen through.

VOICE OF THE OLD SOLDIER: They won't pull!

STEPDAUGHTER: That's the Queen. Her Professor and Soldier are with her. I wonder where they got the dogs!

JANUARY: Have patience, you'll soon find out. Well, Brothers, throw more brushwood into the fire. I promised this soldier to let him warm himself here.

STEPDAUGHTER: Yes, do let him, Grandpa. He helped me gather brushwood and gave me his mittens when I was cold.

JANUARY: What do you say, Brothers?

DECEMBER: If you promised, so be it.

OCTOBER: But the soldier is not alone.

MARCH *(peering through the branches):* That's true. With him are an old man, a girl, and two dogs.

STEPDAUGHTER: The old man is kind, too—he got me a fur coat.

JANUARY: You're right, the old man means well, we can let him in. But how about the others? The girl seems to be spiteful.

STEPDAUGHTER: She certainly can be spiteful but by now her spite may have got frozen out of her. Do you hear her voice? It's quite pitiful!

JANUARY: Well, we'll see. But just so they don't find their way here again, we'll lay a trail for them where there was none before and will be none afterward. *(Strikes the ground with his staff. The trees move apart and the QUEEN's dog-driven sleigh comes into the clearing. The DOGS are still fighting, pulling the sleigh in opposite directions as the OLD SOLDIER whips them on. In all their actions the two DOGS resemble the OLD WOMAN and her DAUGHTER, each of whom can be plainly recognized. The sleigh stops under the trees some distance from the campfire.)*

OLD SOLDIER: Here's the campfire. The old man didn't fool me. Greetings to all this honest company. Allow me to warm myself.

JANUARY: Sit down and do so.

OLD SOLDIER *(recognizing JANUARY):* Hullo, master! You do have a merry blaze. But please permit me to take care

of my passengers, too. We soldiers have a rule—first find billets for your officers, then look after yourself.

JANUARY: Well, if you have such a rule, go ahead.

OLD SOLDIER: Step this way, Your Majesty. *(To the PROFESSOR.)* This way, sir.

QUEEN: Oh, I can't move!

OLD SOLDIER: That's all right, Your Majesty. You'll soon get warm. Now, let me set you on your feet. *(Lifts her out of the sleigh.)* And your teacher. *(Shouts to the PROFESSOR.)* Stretch your legs, sir. We're stopping for a rest.

The QUEEN and the PROFESSOR walk hesitantly up to the campfire. The DOGS, tails between their legs, follow them.

STEPDAUGHTER *(to the QUEEN and the PROFESSOR):* Won't you come nearer? You'll get warmer that way.

The OLD SOLDIER, the QUEEN, and the PROFESSOR turn towards the STEPDAUGHTER and gaze at her with astonishment. The DOGS also notice her. Startled, they sit back on their haunches and begin to bark in turn, as if asking each other: "Is that her?"—"Can it be?"—"Yes, it's her."

QUEEN *(to the PROFESSOR):* Look, this is the same girl that found the snowdrops. But how gorgeously dressed she is now!

OLD SOLDIER: No mistake about it, Your Majesty, that's her all right. *(To the STEPDAUGHTER.)* Good evening, ma'am. So we meet again—for the third time, I reckon. Only I can hardly recognize you. You look like a queen!

QUEEN *(her teeth chattering):* What are you saying? I'll show you!

JANUARY: Don't put on airs here, my girl. The soldier is our guest while you're just somebody he brought along with him.

QUEEN *(stamping her foot):* No! I brought him along!

FEBRUARY: Oh no, you didn't. He can go anywhere he pleases while you can't budge without him.

QUEEN: So! Well, good-bye then!

JANUARY: Don't think we'll ask you to stay.

FEBRUARY: Don't let us detain you.

QUEEN *(to the OLD SOLDIER):* Harness the dogs. We're driving off.

OLD SOLDIER: Wait a bit, Your Majesty. You'd better warm yourself, your teeth are chattering. As soon as we get a little warmer, we'll go on with your journey—slowly—clop—clop! *(Looking around, notices the white HORSES harnessed to the sleigh.)* Oh, these are brave horses! I haven't seen anything like them even in the royal stables. Whose are they?

JANUARY *(pointing at the STEPDAUGHTER):* There sits their mistress.

OLD SOLDIER: Permit me to congratulate you on the purchase, ma'am.

STEPDAUGHTER: It wasn't a purchase—it's a gift.

OLD SOLDIER: All the better. Such a handsome gift, too. *(The DOGS dart at the HORSES and bark at them.)* Quiet, beasts! Back to where you were! Can you believe it! Hardly into your dogskin and already jumping at horses!

STEPDAUGHTER: They do sound angry when they bark—like quarreling, only you can't make out the words. I feel as though I've heard their barking before but I can't remember where.

JANUARY: Maybe you have heard it.

OLD SOLDIER: Of course you have. Didn't they live in the same house with you?

STEPDAUGHTER: We had no dogs in our house.

OLD SOLDIER: Take a good look—you may recognize them.

The DOGS avert their heads from the STEPDAUGHTER.

STEPDAUGHTER *(throwing up her hands)*: Oh, no! That's impossible!

OLD SOLDIER: Possible or not, it's a fact!

The red-pelted DOG comes up, whining, to the STEPDAUGHTER and fawns on her; the black DOG tries to lick her hand.

QUEEN: Look out, they'll bite you!

The DOGS lie down, wag their tails, and roll on the ground.

STEPDAUGHTER: No, they seem to be getting more gentle. *(To the MONTHS.)* But surely they're not going to remain dogs the rest of their lives?

JANUARY: No, that's not necessary. Let them live with you for three years, guarding your house and garden. If by that time they learn to behave themselves, bring them here on New Year's Eve and I'll remove the dog pelts from them.

PROFESSOR: What if they don't mend their ways even in three years?

JANUARY: Then they can come back in six.

FEBRUARY: Or nine.

OLD SOLDIER: Dogs don't live very long, you know. Oh, aunties! It doesn't look like you'll ever wear kerchiefs over your heads again or walk on two legs! *(The DOGS jump at him, barking.)* There you are! *(Drives them off with a stick.)*

QUEEN: You won't mind, will you, if I bring my court dogs here, too, on New Year's Eve? My dogs are tame and gentle and can walk on their hind legs. Perhaps they will also turn into human beings?

JANUARY: No, not if they walk on their hind legs. As they

have been dogs, so they will remain dogs. And now, my dear guests, it's time for me to attend to my business. Without me the frost doesn't crackle as it should in January, nor does the wind blow with the proper force, nor does the snow fall in the right direction. And it's time for you to resume your journey. The moon is high in the heavens and will light your way. Only you'll have to hurry up and move fast.

OLD SOLDIER: We'd be glad to hurry up, Grandpa, but our shaggy horses bark more than they pull. With them we won't get home till next year. It would be different if we were given a lift with those white horses.

JANUARY: Well, ask the mistress—perhaps she'll help you.

OLD SOLDIER: Shall I ask her, Your Majesty?

QUEEN: No.

OLD SOLDIER: Well, there's nothing to be done about it. Hey, you, my lop-eared steeds, get back into your harness! Whether we like it or not, we'll have to go for a spin with you. *(The DOGS nuzzle the STEPDAUGHTER.)*

PROFESSOR: Your Majesty.

QUEEN: Yes?

PROFESSOR: You know, Your Majesty, we're still a long distance from the palace, and the cold is fierce, a regular January cold, if I may say so. I'll never reach home and you'll freeze to death, too, without a fur coat.

SOLDIER: What do you say, Your Majesty?

DOGS: Bow-wow?

QUEEN: How can I ask her for anything? I've never asked favours of anybody in my life. Suppose she answers "no"?

JANUARY: Who knows? She's just as likely to say "yes." Her sleigh is a big one, enough room in it for everybody.

QUEEN *(lowering her head)*: It's not that.

JANUARY: What then?

QUEEN *(frowning)*: Why, I've had her coat taken away from her, I wanted to drown her, I threw her ring into a hole in the ice. Besides, I can't ask. I wasn't taught to ask. I can only order. I'm a Queen.

JANUARY *(mockingly)*: Oh, I see. We had no idea of that.

FEBRUARY: We don't care who or what you are whence you came. A Queen, eh? And who's that? Your teacher?

QUEEN: Yes.

FEBRUARY *(to the PROFESSOR)*: How is it you didn't teach her such a simple thing? She knows how to order but not how to ask. Who ever heard of such a thing?

PROFESSOR: Her Majesty learned only what she wished to learn.

QUEEN: Well, if you want to know, I've learned a great deal today, more in a single day than I learned from you in three years. *(To the STEPDAUGHTER.)* Look here, my dear, give us a lift in your sleigh, please. I'll reward you royally.

STEPDAUGHTER: Thank you, Your Majesty, I have everything I need.

QUEEN: You see—she refuses. I said she would.

FEBRUARY: Apparently you don't ask in the right way.

QUEEN: How should I ask? *(To the PROFESSOR.)* Did I say it wrong?

PROFESSOR: No, Your Majesty, from the point of view of grammar, what you said was perfectly correct.

OLD SOLDIER: Please forgive me, Your Majesty, I'm not one of those men of science, I'm just a plain soldier. I know nothing about grammar. But allow me to teach you this time.

QUEEN: Well, speak.

OLD SOLDIER: If I were Your Majesty, I wouldn't promise her any rewards—you promised plenty before—but I'd simply

say to her: "Be so kind as to take me along with you." You see, you're not hiring a cab.

QUEEN: I think I see what you mean. *(To the STEPDAUGHTER.)* Please take us along with you. We're freezing.

STEPDAUGHTER: Of course I'll take you with me—gladly. I can even give you fur coats—all of you, your teacher and the soldier, too. I have a lot of them in my coffer. Here you are. I won't take them back. I know how cold it can be on New Year's Eve.

QUEEN: Thank you. For one fur coat I'll give you twelve . . .

PROFESSOR *(in an affrighted tone):* You're doing it again, Your Majesty!

QUEEN: I won't—I won't! *(The STEPDAUGHTER produces the coats. The QUEEN and the PROFESSOR put theirs on, but not the OLD SOLDIER.)* Why aren't you putting yours on?

OLD SOLDIER: I dare not, Your Majesty. The coat isn't according to the regulations—of the prescribed cut.

QUEEN: Never mind that. Nothing we've done today has been according to the regulations. Put it on.

OLD SOLDIER *(obeying):* That's right. We didn't cut a grand figure at all. We promised to take other people for a ride, and had to beg for a ride ourselves. We promised a fur coat as a present, and ourselves got one, and are thankful for it. Allow me to sit on the coach box. Driving horses isn't like handling dogs—it's something I know more about.

JANUARY: Sit down, Soldier, drive your passengers. And mind you don't lose your cap on the way. Ours are fast horses, they overtake the hours, and the minutes fly like sparks from their hoofs. You'll be home before you know it.

STEPDAUGHTER *(from the sleigh):* Good-bye, Brother Months. I'll never forget your New Year's campfire!

QUEEN: Neither shall I, even if I try!

PROFESSOR: And if you do forget, I'll be there to remind you of it.

OLD SOLDIER: Good-bye, gentlemen! Best of luck to you!

SPRING AND SUMMER MONTHS: Pleasant journey!

WINTER MONTHS: Good sleighing!

RAVEN: Far-r-ewell!

The sleigh drives away with the DOGS close behind it, barking.

STEPDAUGHTER *(looking back):* Good-bye, April!

APRIL: Good-bye, my dear! Expect me as your guest soon! *(The sleigh bells tinkle for some time before they finally die down. The dawn is breaking.)*

JANUARY *(looking about):* Well, Grandfather Forest, it was a busy day, wasn't it? We turned up your snow and woke the forest folk. But that's all right, you can sleep in peace now.

TWELVE MONTHS:

Burn yourself out, campfire,
Turn into embers and die.
Drift from the logs, blue smoke—
Over the trees float high.
Climb to the frozen tree-tops,
Curl away to the sky.

APRIL:

The young moon is waning,
The stars fade one by one,
And from the gates of morning
Marches the flaming sun,
It ushers in a new day—
Lo, the New Year has begun!

TWELVE MONTHS *(turning to the sun)*:

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

JANUARY:

It has neither wheels nor horses
To drive it out sky-high.
A flaming ball of molten gold
That dazzles every eye,
Noiselessly, silently,
It sails across the sky.

TWELVE MONTHS:

Fire, burn high,
Flame, never die!

END

